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'Swing' at Annapolis Summer Garden Theatre by Amanda Gunther

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It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing! And **Annapolis Summer Garden Theatre** proves that they've got it as they kick off their 47th season with their production of *Swing!* Two thirds rhythm and one third soul this happening musical brings a fusion of swing music along with jazz, tap, west coast swing, Latin, and a whole lot of singing, dancing and big band playing for the whole audience to enjoy. Directed and Choreographed by Patricia Golden with Musical Direction by Julie Ann Hawk, this up-tempo musical will bite you with the dancing bug!



— Katie Gardner, Kelston Thomas, David Merrill, and Janae Barber. Photo courtesy of Annapolis Summer Garden Theatre.

Nothing gets you in the mood for a night out stompin' at the Savoy than a big band stage. Set Designers Patricia Golden and Matt Mitchell bring you right back into that 30's era feel of things with their white and black color scheme and big sweeping staircases on either side of the main stage. The steps are even painted to look like piano keys. The atmosphere is classy and there's even an upper tier to separate the singers from the dancers from time to time, which really adds a multi-dimensional feel of just how deep swing music can run.

Keeping up with the 30's glam approach, Costumer Meghan O'Beirne sets the tone of swing all across the board. With festive black dancing dresses accented in purple, gold, pink and electric blue for the lead female dancers, and popping shirts and suspenders to match on the fellas, you get a colorful eyeful that really helps move the music as you watch them dance. O'Beirne pulls out all the stops for singer Katie Gardner, each dress more lovely and luxurious than the last; a myriad of marvelous to accent her stunning voice.

Having the big band right in the middle of the stage really does justice to the style of the 1930's big band style clubs. Pit Conductor and keyboardist Ken Kimble leads these jazzy musicians through a series of some of the most recognizable swing hits in America. Kimble is an animated conductor and keeps pace with the singers and the dancers with a true understanding of swings highly complex syncopated rhythms.

Trumpeter (alternating) Gary Wolf and Randy Martell, as well as Trombonist (alternating) Nick Hogg and Mike Bravin, are featured heavily in solos throughout the production with gorgeous slides, insane solo riffs and freestyles that just blow your mind!

The show is so close to perfection that it pains me to note the faults in Patricia Golden's choreography. While the majority of the dancing is stunning, a series of intricate swing routines that are really upbeat and keep the audience tapping their toes, at my performances the synchronization in places was off. Some of the more complex moves that involve sliding the girls under the guys' legs or throwing them over their shoulders end up looking clunky and incomplete. The simpler routines are clean cut and extremely effective, and despite some of these messier moves the entire dancing ensemble is wearing a big bright smile to keep the audience thoroughly entertained.

And no one's wearing a bigger smile in that dancing ensemble than Amanda S. Cimaglia and Hannah Thornhill. Both of these dancing girls are on their A-game for the entire performance. Thornhill is a particularly animated and expressive dancer, especially during "Dancers in Love" a dancing duet that features Wendell Holland. The duet lets Thornhill and Holland try to one-up each other with complex moves, Thornhill coming out the clear and hilarious winner. Keep your eyes on her tapping feet early in Act II, they're fantastically fast.

As for Cimaglia, she basically steals the show when it comes to dancing. Always smiling and exuding all the right emotions to match the mood of the music into her figure as she dances, her body is like a conduit, connecting the current of the live big band to the audience. Her biggest dance number comes during "Throw That Girl Around/Show Me What You've Got" where each rhythmic shift showcases her raw talent in the field of dancing, especially with the Latin style moves.

The dancing ensemble as a whole keeps things moving for big numbers like "Boogie-Woogie Country" and the "Finale: Swing It Brother, Swing," which is the show-stopper of show stoppers, showcasing those fabulous color-coordinated costumes in a series of vivacious swing moves that brings the audience to their feet with applause.

For as hot as the dancing is the singing is twice that impressive. With four title singers that carry the electric energy of this show from start to finish there's no slowing these crazy cats down. But when Janae Barber takes to the stage it's a dose of mellow moonlight that brings the boiling temperature right down to a



— Andrew Robbins and Katie Shewbridge. Photo courtesy of Annapolis Summer Garden Theatre.

slow simmer; that easy nighttime sound that lets you relax into the more subdued tones of jazz and soul. Barber's solos are often placed after fast and furious numbers letting her smooth sound chill the audience into something sublime. This is particularly true of her solo "Skylark" where she has a slow and almost sorrowful wail that pours out to the audience like a crisp champagne on ice. Barber isn't just a one note gal, though, her number "Hit Me With A Hot Note and Watch me Bounce" is a saucy little ditty that gets her all over the trombonist while showing off her vocal range.

Most frequently paired up with Barber is smooth-talking, fast singing Kelston Thomas. He kick-starts the show with a bang in "It Don't Mean a Thing if it Ain't Got That Swing." Thomas's vocal quality is reminiscent of every big band singer you ever heard hoppin' through hoops back in the day; smooth and upbeat with a real drive to his melody. The crooning narrative type, Thomas really shines for numbers like "Kitchen Mechanics' Night Out" and "Two and Four." With a complete understanding of how to sing perfection on those off-beat rhythms Thomas will have you swooning and bouncing along for the ride.

He may never make it on time for his dates but David Merrill is an astonishing singer. With charisma and charm he drifts into "Bli-Blip" making it the funniest duet in the production. His voice is powerful and emotive; a blast of fresh inspiration when it comes to jazzing up these snappy tunes. Merrill's vocal energy is indefatigable especially during "Show Me What You've Got," where he really erupts with jazz straight from the depths of his soul. But his most impressive number is the unique and funky spin he puts on "Boogie-Woogie Bugle Boy." His duets with Katie Gardner, especially "All of Me/I Won't Dance" are ripe with the crackle of romantic sparks and their voices meld together in a manner that can only be described as perfection.

Katie Gardner is the singing sensation of the show. Rolling up through the audience and onto the stage for her first big number, "Bounce Me Brother (With a Solid Four)" she's a pistol from the moment she arrives. Her voice is like that cool gin in a hot jazzy nightclub, just what you need to keep you going. She'll flip your lid for numbers like "Stompin' at the Savoy" and her sassy sultry rendition of "Blues in the Night" is to die for. Versatile and complex she eases into the more laid back numbers like "I'll Be Seeing You" with such an air of sophisticated lounge singer that you completely forget about everything else but the words as they leave her lips. A phenomenal vocal power, Gardner is right on the money for this swinging good time of a show.

So swing on down because tickets are booking up quick. *Swing!* is one toe-tapping treat you won't want to miss!

Running Time: Approximately two hours, with one intermission.



Swing! plays through June 15, 2013 at Annapolis Summer Garden Theatre – 143 Compromise Street, in Annapolis, MD. For tickets, call the box office at (410) 268-9212, or purchase them **online**.



ABOUT AUTHOR **AMANDA GUNTHER**

Amanda Gunther is an actress, a writer, and loves the theatre. She graduated with her BFA in acting from the University of Maryland Baltimore County and spent two years studying abroad in Sydney, Australia at the University of New South Wales. Her time spent in Sydney taught her a lot about the performing arts, from Improv Comedy to performance art drama done completely in the dark. She loves theatre of all kinds, but loves musicals the best. When she's not working, if she's not at the theatre, you can usually find her reading a book, working on ideas for her own books, or just relaxing and taking in the sights and sounds of her Baltimore hometown. She loves to travel, exploring new venues for performing arts and other leisurely activities. Writing for the DCMetroTheaterArts as a Senior Writer gives her a chance to pursue her passion of the theatre and will broaden her horizons in the writer's field.

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