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Annapolis Summer Garden Theatre's Swing!

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Big entertainment with 17 singers and dancers, 30 songs and dances and 100 costumes

Swing! was a gusty and lusty blast from the past on Friday night at Annapolis Summer Garden Theatre. At 53 degrees with gale-force winds, it felt like Winter Garden Theatre. President Carolyn Kirby said she hadn't seen the like since the cast were babes. But as the program notes, "Swing was never a time or place — it has always been a state of mind." In the end, mind triumphed over season.

Whether from opening weekend jitters or hypothermic shivers in their wind-whipped silks, some performers had trouble maintaining balance and pitch in Act I. But audience members who stayed to the bitter end were rewarded with the best numbers of the show when those hepcats came back jumpin' with jive tight harmonies in Act II.

With 17 singers and dancers and starring four double threats, this Tony-nominated 1999 musical revue celebrates the big band orchestras of Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Benny Goodman and Glenn Miller, and crooners like Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Johnnie Mercer The Andrews Sisters. Choreographically, it's a lot of jitterbug, Lindy hop, tap, Charleston, bal and even square dance. It's a little schizophrenic in places, but the 30-song program is a nice r of up-tempo, ballads, scat singing, solo and big ensemble numbers.

Katie Gardner is the blonde bombshell who blows everything she touches sky-high, and her showcase pieces, Bounce Me Brother and Stompin' at the Savoy are the cat's pajamas. She and David Merrill are also delightful in Bli Blip and All of Me, staged as a vignette about a lover's misunderstanding.

Like a young Paul Lynde without the sarcasm, Merrill makes a fine Act II M.C., particularly when he hams it up and improvises lyrics about the weather and the show itself.

Kelston Thomas is the smooth daddy to watch in Act I, from his curtain-raising Swing It Brother, Swing to his duets Two and Four and I'm Gonna Love You Tonight with Janae Barbe



Kelston Thomas and Janae Barber. <<photo compliments of Annapolis Summer Garden Theatre>>

Barber, with the elegance of Lena Horne, shines brightest in Cry Me a River, playfully sung opposite a trombonist (Nick Hogg/Mike Bravin).

Other featured dancers include Hannah Thornhill in Dancers in Love, a funny skit with Wendell Holland about a May/November romance; Katie Shrewbridge and Billy Luzier in the balletic I'll Be Seeing You; Amanda Cimaglia in a slinky Harlem Nocturne; and Jessica Straul with Luzier in Shout and Feel It Out. Ethan Goldberg cuts the rug and sweeps it in a clever Broadway dance and with acrobatics using Aaron Quade and Andrew Robbins as props.

Despite these high points, the show could be cut by half to eliminate the more lackluster numbers. Some of this is due to lousy orchestration. The funky techno slowed-down Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy, for example, is painful, and the Western numbers need a lot more chili peppers to spice them up.

Still, with 100 stunning costumes and creative staging, the show is appealing. You will find yourself tapping your toes, dancing in your seat and humming like Ella when you leave.

Swing! Original concept by Paul Kelly. Director & Choreographer: Patricia Golden. Musical Director: Julie Ann Hawk. Costumes: Meaghan O'Beirne. Technical Director: Matt Mitchell.

With Aubrey Baden, Jenna Bouma, Shannon Boyd and Christina Shunk; and an orchestra including Karl Alexander, Gary Wolfe, Randy Martell, Kevin Hawk, Meagan Frame, Matt Henry, Zach Konick and Ken Kimble.

Playing thru June 15, Th-Su and W June 12 at 8:30pm at Annapolis Summer Garden Theatre, 143 Compromise St., Annapolis. \$20; rsv 410-268-9212 or www.summergarden.com.

Publication Information

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