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**Annapolis Summer Garden Theatre's Spamalot**

Always look on the bright si-ide of life ...

**By Jim Reiter**

There are two kinds of people in this world: Those who get Monty Python, and those who don't. The dividing chasm is willingness to accept silliness. Python's humor is physical (Google Silly Walk), yet it has an underlying winking, silly intelligence that the don't-gets ... well, don't get.

Fortunately for Annapolis Summer Garden Theatre, the opening night audience for Monty Python's *Spamalot* was filled mostly with gets. Based largely on the 1975 film Monty Python and the Holy Grail — but borrowing from plenty of other Python hits — the Mike Nichols-directed *Spamalot* premiered on Broadway in 2005 and won three Tonys, including Best Musical. Some of the humor that is directly aimed at a Broadway audience full Python fanatics fell a little flat in Annapolis (case in point: the Mel Brooks-ish “You Won't Succeed on Broadway ... if you don't have any Jews”). Some noticeable opening night tentativeness between orchestra and chorus will tighten up over the five-week run. But this is already a delightful production creatively directed by Jeffrey Lesniak and highlighted by stella individual performances.



*Photo by Alyssa Bouma Monty Python's humor is physical, yet it has an underlying winking, silly intelligence in this parody of Arthurian times*

Even if you haven't seen the movie (and by all means, do, it's timeless!), you're in for a silly good time.

As some Broadway musicals use a thin plot to string together strong songs, *Spamalot* uses its thin plot — Arthur and his knights searching for the Holy Grail — to string together classic Python comedy bits and a few songs. The songs are meant as much to skewer Broadway music as to push along said plot. Python founder and writer Eric Idle wrote the lyrics and book. A parody of Arthurian times, *Spamalot* revolves around King Arthur (a droll Ruben Vellekoop) and his knights of the “very round” table. The knights are the stars of this show.

Each plays several roles with comic timing and delivery — not to mention the various speal

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and singing voices — all spot on. Standing out in the voice department is David Merrill, whose Sir (Dennis) Galahad gets things moving with a hilarious diatribe about the woes of the workin' class. He then joins the Lady of the Lake (Alice Goldberg) for a satirical yet lyrical jab at formulaic Broadway called “The Song That Goes Like This.” Merrill’s tenor is a treat. Later he shines as the famed Black Knight, insisting “it’s just a flesh wound” after losing his limbs to his challenger. He reappears as Prince Herbert’s overbearing father, getting into a hilarious back and forth with two guards who can’t quite grasp the concept of “stay here.”

The other knights — Sir Robin (Fred Fletcher-Jackson), Sir Lancelot (Joshua Mooney) and Bedevere (DJ Wojciehowski) — each contribute several comedic turns. Notable is Mooney as French Taunter (“I fart in your general direction!”), the Knight of Ni and, of course, Lancelot, whose sexuality is confirmed for him by the singers of “His Name Is Lancelot” (“he likes to do a lot; he wears tight pants a lot”). Other standouts: a very funny Steven Baird as Patsy, the king’s dedicated coconut-clopping sound effects toadie; and Austin Heemstra, who narrates things as historian and gets his own laughs as Not Dead Fred, the Minstrel and Prince Herbert.

In addition to the very effective duet with Merrill on “The Song That Goes Like This,” Goldberg’s Lady of the Lake takes another shot at Broadway tunes when she returns to the stage in “The Diva’s Lament” (“whatever happened to my part? It was exciting at the start ...”).

Perhaps the most famous Python song of them all, “Always Look on the Bright Side of Life” opens Act II (and returns very effectively after the curtain call) exclaiming “When you’re chewing on life’s gristle, don’t grumble, give a whistle.” Originally sung in *Life of Brian* by a chorus of the crucified, it works, very well, here.

Also working very well is the multi-level castle set by Dan Lavanga and the wide variety of colorful costumes by Linda Swann. Only God and Eric Idle (one and the same in this show) know what was going on behind the scenes during those quick changes.

Don’t think that because *Spamalot* runs through August 31 you can just gallop on over and secure a seat. Annapolis Summer Garden Theatre has a hit in this one, so the Holy Grail around Annapolis this month may be securing two tickets, not one chalice.

Music director: Steve Przybyiski. Choreographer: Rikki Howie Laceywell. Stage manager: John Nunemaker. Lighting designer: Matt Till. Sound designer: Dan Caughran. About 2 hours and 15 minutes including intermission.

Playing thru Aug. 31: Th-Su 8:30pm at Annapolis Summer Garden Theatre. \$20; rsvp: 410-268-9212; [www.summergarden.com](http://www.summergarden.com).

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