

Theater
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Nifty Knickers

The Rep's take on Steve Martin play combines flash and finesse

by Martin Brady

Tennessee Repertory Theatre's current mounting of *The Underpants*, Steve Martin's adaptation of German playwright Carl Sternheim's 1910 farce, shows just how far production values can go in goosing the entertainment factor. The play was first mounted here in 2006 by Actors Bridge Ensemble, a quaintly inspired production that hit all the marks and did Martin justice. The Rep does equally well with the text—but with the advantages of the broad-canvas Polk Theater proscenium and a serious budget for sets and costumes, the company brings a highly professional sheen to the endeavor, the likes of which we rarely see locally.

The Underpants follows the events that transpire after a young woman unexpectedly drops her panties during the king's procession. Instant admirers start to visit her in search of a rented room, and our heroine, married to an uptight and very regimented government clerk, toys with the possibility of an affair. Martin's thin plot introduces six cartoonish characters whose comedic eccentricities combine with the playwright's tongue-in-cheek banter, double entendres and sly social satire over the course of 90 or so minutes, delivered in one long act.

Gary Hoff's set is a minor masterwork: a colorful turn-of-the-20th-century Dusseldorf home, featuring rich-looking woods and canny decorative touches. Trish Clark's costumes are also period-conscious, with fitting attention to romance and German stereotypes. Michael Barnett's lighting design elicits a candy-coated visual sense that is very apropos to the loopy tale.

Director Lane Davies smartly exploits the wide playing area, and there's as much interplay within the scenes as there is during the many entrances and exits that typify traditional farce. His thoughtful blocking enables his actors to score consistent laughs with their droll repartee.

The fine cast is headed up by Marin Miller as hausfrau Louise Maske, surprised by her unwanted notoriety but more than willing to investigate the sexual possibilities suddenly before her. Miller is delightfully wry, nicely balancing naïveté with naughtiness. Her boorish hubby, Theo, is played by Marc Silver, a California colleague of director Davies in his Rep debut. His is a literate, energetic turn, though not as dark as Matthew Carlton's portrayal two years ago. In so doing, Silver definitely provides an interesting take on the play's most controversial role.

Patrick Waller is a charmer as the poet Versati, declaring his passion for Louise with great flourish, then becoming more absorbed in his need to versify. Bobby Wyckoff is the barber Cohen, a subtle caricature who must avoid dropping clues about his Jewishness within earshot of the overbearing, not-so-veiled anti-Semite Theo. Samuel Whited maximizes his briefer moments as the dour prude Klingelhoff, then brings down the house with an incongruously salacious exclamation.

As the nosy neighbor Gertrude, Martha Wilkinson makes yet another joyous stage appearance, mixing well-defined movement with brassy declarations and reveling in her character's vicarious pleasure at Louise's newfound popularity. Davies makes a humorous grandstanding cameo as the king himself at play's end.

A musical underscore effectively blends polkas with some clichéd classical strains. (Only nitpickers will care that "The Pennsylvania Polka" wasn't published until 1942, some 30 years after the play's setting.)

Driven by its directorial verve and wonderful technical virtues, The Rep's *Underpants* is replendent, consistently entertaining theater.