

Warren Gerds/Critic at Large: Review: 'La La Lucille' is merrily one for the ages in theater in Sturgeon Bay

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Breaking into dance in a scene from Third Avenue Playhouse's "La La Lucille" are the butler Alfredo (Alex M. Sabin, left) and the former vaudeville team of Lucille (Samantha Sostarich) and Thomas Tuttle (James Valcq). (Heidi Hodges)

STURGEON BAY, Wis. (WFRV)

John Smith is caught between a rock and a hard place.

"It's your money or your wife," the destitute dentist is told.

And so the kernel of a romp is born.

Or was born.

This romp... or musical comedy... or dance-happy farce... or merry burst of theatricality is from 1919.

How were shows done in 1919? Especially a show with music by George Gershwin in one of his first steps to lasting fame?

More than likely, they were done as presented in “La La Lucille” by the professional Third Avenue Playhouse in an astounding re-imagining by the playhouse’s co-artistic director, James Valcq.

The music – Gershwin’s music – in “La La Lucille” has a certain bounce. Perky. Syncopated. Jaunty. Stuff to be danced to.

“Stuff to be danced to” – ah, there’s the rub in this production. It is one thing to recreate the music of George Gershwin on piano. It is entirely another to set dances to that music – and another to dance in perky, syncopated and jaunty ways. Gershwin’s music has scores and recordings.

The dance? What might have transpired in the original 1919 Broadway version of “La La Lucille” is re-built from the imaginations of James Valcq and co-choreographer Ryan Cappleman – and then delivered by the cast, often in whirlwind ways. The surprise of this production is not so much how it has the aura of acting and singing in a frivolous 1919 tongue-in-cheek Broadway comedy but how packed with dance action it is.

And Gershwin gets one-upped. He wrote the music, a creative task for sure. But James Valcq and Ryan Cappleman not only perform his finger-blitzes of music on the piano (together and separately), but they appear on stage as a couple of goofy characters and dance the foot-blitzes of dances they have come up with. Included are flurries of tap dancing and swirling and soft shoe and grandiose flourishes and romantic gliding – for two to six dancers.

This is all very dynamic. The opening night audience Thursday latched on to the performers’ level of exhilaration and erupted in standing cheers and applause at the end. The scene was as festive as it gets in Studio Theatre.

The cast is inspired by the rare, rare opportunity to perform in a show that hasn’t been performed in 100 years (though my feeling is nobody knows for sure) with the

talented James Valcq, who researched and adapted the show. Much blended expertise is called on – to sing, to dance, to act, to team – by the fired-up cast, some of whom have well-established careers and two who are being launched. In the story, there's a good deal of corniness. In the setup, the financially hard up John Smith and his adored wife, Lucille Tuttle Smith, can inherit \$2 million (\$29 million in today's money) if they divorce. Divorce? John Smith's rich aunt objected to Lucille – for not only did she act on the stage, she wore satin trousers! Lucille's father's take on the situation is “It's foolish to be poor.” Da, da, dump. So the three and the family's lawyer contrive to set up the appropriate inappropriateness with a co-respondent to be caught in feigned messin' around with John Smith so Lucille can have grounds for divorce and later leap through a loophole in the will.

Along the way, the story traipses to a hotel and a honeymoon suite and honeymooners who have eloped and a house detective and a coochy-coochy dancer and a frumpy janitress and her irate knife-thrower Italian husband and the under-age honeymooning bride's harrumphing Southern father in a fine mess. At one point, Lucille is perplexed and says, “I don't know what to do.” Her father pauses... a light goes off. He says, “Let's sing.” Her father happens to be portrayed by James Valcq, who concocted this situation and now breaks all sorts of “rules” by heading to the piano at the side of the stage to play and sing “Somehow It Seldom Comes True.”

James Valcq has also concocted a way to add “Swanee” to the show, even though the famous song was not part of the original “La La Lucille.” The harrumphing Southern father pours it out in saucy scene that works.

All cylinders are go with this cast.

Samantha Sostarich brims with energy and full-on expression as Lucille. She launches a HUGE note to end one number.

Adam Estes is an excellent match for her in song, dance and colorful acting as John Smith, who has been around the block in the romance area but is now devoted. He and Sostarich team in a key dance that is as light and limber as Gershwin's music for it.

Drew Brhel, an actor of many faces, adds a few more in “La La Lucille.” Key ones are an unctuous attorney and the harrumphing father in a suiting interpretation of “Sewanee” that brings the house down.

Lydia Rose Eiche nimbly doubles in opposites, the hotsy-totsy dancer and the creaky-voiced janitress, Fanny, who in one scene manages to have four husbands. James Valcq, as Lucille’s ex-vaudevillian hooper father, lets out all stops in creating the show and directing and choreographing and singing, dancing and acting on stage and playing piano and, at the bows Thursday night, radiating in sheer joy of success.

Ryan Cappleman, as the honeymooning husband, has a gas chewing the scenery and creating the dances – and delivering some on stage – and playing Gershwin’s music on piano. Fantastic.

Meghan Jarecki, as the honeymooning wife, teams with Ryan Cappleman in the singing-dancing-comedy-romancing in a fully spirited performance. She is an intern in the company, and she sprints in this wonderful opportunity to be part of a remarkable production.

Alex M. Sabin sets fire to the action as the excitable husband of Fanny, always ready to flip a knife or pick a fight or let loose his over-wrought rage. He also is a part of plays on words, a key one being “Fanny.”

Side note: Much of the humor in “La La Lucille” turns on earthiness. A steady stream of mild innuendo runs through it – stuff about honeymooning and marriage and meeting in a hotel. One joke about the hotel: At the same time as John and Lucille, there are 20 Mr. and Mrs. Smiths with rooms there.

Zachary Dean, playing multiple roles, shows his versatility. Also an intern, Zachary Dean is right there delivering the goods, particularly as the house detective with an Irish brogue trying to figure out the frayed and frazzled honeymoon suite shenanigans.

James Valcq has turned back the pages to a fascinating time when George Gershwin was making big strides in his career. “La La Lucille” would kind of get

lost in what was to come for George Gershwin. Hints of that come in snippets that James Valcq adds to the overture and finale – passages from “Rhapsody in Blue.” At the very end is a marvelous homage to George Gershwin when a large image of him at the piano is projected on the stage’s backdrop.

Great stuff in so many ways.