

Must-See Theatre by the Sea's Producers

"Stunned by the news that my friend/co-writer Tom Meehan has died. I'll miss his sweetness & talent. We have all lost a giant of the theatre." - Mel Brooks

Theatre by the Sea closes out its 2017 season with the utterly ridiculous (in all the best ways) Mel Brooks musical, *The Producers*, running through Sep 10. On the night *Motif* attended, it had just been discovered that *Producers* co-author, Tom Meehan, passed away, lending a commemorative air to the proceedings. Any melancholy thoughts were immediately dispelled, however, with the exuberance of the klezmer-tinged opening salvo of "Opening Night/The King of Broadway," two numbers that create exposition (Max Bialystock, a fading star of a Broadway producer has just birthed another flop, and is no longer taken seriously by critics and audiences alike) as well as set the bar for the level of performance to follow. This show runs almost three hours, but never feels like it. One gloriously sophomoric gag after another rolls by, accompanied by Mel Brooks' surprisingly accomplished musical numbers until even the most uptight patron is forced to give in to this surprisingly prescient skewering of all the sacred cows Brooks and Meehan could find.

The Producers, first a film (1968), then a Tony Award-winning musical, then a film again, is familiar enough to most to not warrant a plot rehash, but even the most casual of audiences are aware



that the storyline incorporates Nazis, Broadway and showgirls in a comedic stew that dares you to be offended. Failing Broadway producer Max (played by triumphant force of nature, Joel Briel) and his nebbish accountant Leo Bloom (a squeaky, but satisfying, Richard Lafleur) concoct a way to bilk investors by producing the worst play ever written. Along the way, tropes and stereotypes are examined, crushed, rebuilt and glorified, all for nothing much more than our amusement. The satire is brilliant and delivered not with a hipster-ish irony, but with a vaudevillian's casual, yet practiced unease. While the setup-joke-laugh routine is the thread that binds the script together, it is the contained anarchy that signals *The Producers'* true genius.

Director/Choreographer Brad Musgrove (a member of the original Broadway cast) stays out of the way of the script and faithfully recreates the original Susan Stroman staging.

Kyle Dixon's scenic design here is a character in and of itself, all skewed perspective and functional cartoon. Impressively, a full recreation of Max's office suite is delivered, all in white, at the top of Act Two, explained away by one of the show's better meta-moments ("When did you have time to do all this?" "During intermission!") and even stacks of newspapers and unread scripts draw appropriate focus long enough to admire the craft that went into their construction. Michael Hyde's sound design is spot-on here, as some TBTS productions can err toward a loudness that can become shrill. Hyde has found a balance of orchestra and voice that is neither muted nor distracting - no small feat in the

venerable Matunuck barn. William Ivey Long's recreation of the original Broadway costume designs are stunning and over-the-top amusing, especially in the ludicrous showstopper of the show-within-the show number, "Springtime for Hitler," with its swaying pretzel skirts and sausage gowns.

Aside from the perfectly paired Briel and Lafleur, standout performances abound. At first, Sabrina Harper's bombshell, Ulla, seemed withdrawn and not up to the brassy heights demanded of the role, but Harper goes for the slow burn, proving to be the wisest and most grounded of the trio that anchors this show, and, ultimately, she shines. When we first meet her, she stands in danger of being upstaged by one of the many alluring and talented ensemble members, but by Act Two, Ulla has us falling in love (lust?) right along with Max and Leo. And, no *Producers* is worth its weight without an appropriate Franz Liebkind, author of the abominable ode to Adolf that Max and Leo seek to stage. A.G. Parks, with his opera background, is one of those performers who has 0% shame and 100% technique. If pressed to pick only one number to watch out of the entire show, it would be difficult not to choose "Der Guten Tag Hop Clop," a riot of inappropriateness and choreographed pigeons, replete with swastikas. Parks steals the show again in Act Two before making way for the outrageously campy Stuart Marland as substitute Hitler and all of the clichés that Brooks seeks to lampoon come together in a profane crescendo. Another nod goes out to Liam Johnson's aide de camp-y, Carmen Ghia, who milks a performance so rich that it may as well have been sponsored by the American Dairy Association.

Whether or not these anti-heroes of Broadway deserve any comeuppance for their scheme is beside the point. The "Springtime" finale is pure 42nd Street, both paying homage to and sending up the glorious excess of old-school musicals and the detour to prison is merely a device to provide a second showstopper along with a magnificent solo by Briel ("Betrayed") in a sequence that keeps upping the ante until both audience and cast can seem to go no further. It's fantastic musical theater as well as a laugh riot and no amount of sacrilege along the way can detract from this show's power.

The Producers follows Bill Hanney's (TBTS owner/producer) well-honed formula of closing the season with a little adult fun and send everyone home with a bang. Next year, he has slotted *Chicago* into that position, so we look forward to seeing if the recipe is still as sweet. In the meantime, *The Producers* is worth checking out, if possible, simply to say you were one of the few to catch it. Whether we say it's "just what the Fuhrer ordered" or "it isn't a Nazi, it's a must see!," the fact remains that Theatre by the Sea has yet another surefire Hit-ler on their hands.

Bill Hanney's Theatre by the Sea presents The Producers, a Mel Brooks Musical, through Sep 10. Performances are Tuesday through Sundays. Tickets can be purchased by phone at 401-782-8587, online at theatrebythesea.com or in person at 364 Cards Pond Rd, Wakefield.