

OSTC's Victor/Victoria Is Topsy-Turvy Fun



As more and more words are deemed insensitive or offensive, musical theater remains one of the few places where politically incorrect language does not ignite one's ire. Such is the case with Ocean State Theatre's gender-bending musical comedy *Victor/Victoria*. With tongue planted firmly in cheek, the suggestion throughout is that being gay is not "normal." But, by show's end, the message is quite clear: It doesn't matter what a couple's sexual preference may be if they love one another.

Based on Blake Edwards' 1982 hit film depicting Paris's nightlife during the 1930s, the musical is a hilarious and heart-warming story of Victoria Grant, a down-on-her-luck British singer who can't find work. Then she meets "Toddy" and the two hatch a scheme where Victoria will become Victor, a female impersonator impersonating a man impersonating a woman with the goal of her becoming the world's most famous female impersonator.

Featuring legendary composer Henry Mancini's wonderful score, OSTC's production, under artistic director Aimee Turner, is refreshingly clean and crisp. While many slapstick comedies try too hard for the easy laughs, with mixed results, this performance delivers far more hits than misses. One of the many highlights being a perfectly executed Three Stooges-like skit where characters creep from room-to-room with doors opening and closing as they narrowly miss detection.

Kudos to the set designers as well. The show calls for frequent scene changes alternating between various nightclubs and luxury hotel suites. Yet the lush and smartly constructed sets allow for some remarkably seamless transitions.

While surprising revelations about several characters' sexual preference add to the laughs, two dancers also surprise with some impressive vocal numbers. First, dance captain Taavon Gamble sizzles in "Le Jazz Hot," displaying some pretty good chops to go along with some pretty smooth moves. Later, the alluring Alison Russo proves to be equally as seductive with her voice during a sultry "Paris by Night."

Speaking of the dancing, choreographer Sebastian Goldberg keeps things sharp and understated. Much of the movements are sensual and flirtatious - a slow shoulder roll or a smoldering stare - nicely capturing the sexuality of Paris' nightlife.

But the highlight of the opening night performance is Kristin Wetherington as Norma Cassidy, the ditz-blond and trophy girlfriend of gangster King Marchan. With an ear-piercing voice and overly active sex-drive, Wetherington steals the show. She is priceless during a raunchy "Paris Makes Me Horny," singing "When I see the Eifel Tower, I need to take a shower." She alone is worth the price of admission.

Eden Casteel's far more guarded Victoria Grant serves as a nice counter-balance to Wetherington's over-the-top Norma. Yearning for true love, Casteel mesmerizes King Marchan - and the audience -

with her flawless singing voice. Marchan becomes so smitten by “Victor,” that he does not care if he is a man or a woman, wondering during “King’s Dilemma” if “the girl I’m in love with is a guy?”

Casteel shines throughout the performance displaying remarkable range and clarity, effortlessly slipping in and out of various octaves, which makes OSTC audience favorite Christopher Swan’s King Marchan even more impressive. He beautifully matches Casteel during a very charming “Almost A Love Song.” With a convincing swagger, the ever-reliable Swan shines as the conflicted alpha-male, standing up to his mobster pals while planting a kiss on “Victor’s” lips.

Bill Whitehead, Jr., returning to stage after a 30-year absence, wonderfully propels the plot forward as the scheming Carroll ‘Toddy’ Todd. With an infectious charm and flamboyance, Whitehead flippantly tosses out hilarious one-liners: “You can’t fire me. I can’t afford it!” Later, when learning a potential lover was also college football all-American lineman, he gasps, “Be still my beating heart, a center!” This, like many of his lines, draws hearty laughter.

Ben Salus, as the aforementioned lineman “Squash” Bernstein, doesn’t have many lines, but when he does, he makes them count, drawing some of the loudest applause when it is discovered that he can also sing.

And, what would a play about Paris be without the stereotypical snooty Frenchman? David Groccia is great fun as Henri Labisse, a cynical Parisian nightclub owner who literally just keeps popping up. With a clumsy charm, Groccia delights with a timely self-effacing humor.

OSTC’s Victor/Victoria runs through May 21 at their Jefferson Boulevard theater. For tickets or more information, visit: oceanstatetheatre.org.