

The quest for love and the loss of innocence part of life's 'Carnival'

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'Carnival'

recommended

When: Through June 12

Where: Light Opera Works at Cahn Auditorium, 600 Emerson, Evanston

Tickets: \$27-\$75

Call: (847) 869-6300

Watching Light Opera Works' charming, lavishly produced revival of "Carnival," you have to wonder why this musical hasn't been brought back to life more often since it debuted on Broadway in 1961 with a cast that included Anna Maria Alberghetti (in the role played by Leslie Caron in the 1953 film "Lili") and Jerry Orbach (fresh from "The Fantasticks," and decades before his role in TV's "Law & Order").

True, there is something a little precious and sentimental about this show, with its dreamy backdrop of a tattered traveling circus and sideshow in postwar Europe. Yet there is nothing soft about its tale of an orphan who finds shelter as part of a carnival "family," but who is subjected to harsh lessons about love and survival along the way. It comes with a lovely score (the work of Bob Merrill, who would go on to collaborate with Jule Styne on "Funny Girl"), and a winning use of puppets (in the old "Kukla, Fran and Ollie" tradition). Also, Michael Stewart's book (drawn from a Paul Gallico story), sets up both the dark love story of wounded souls and the loss of innocence (much as it is explored in the earlier "Carousel" and the later "Phantom of the Opera"), while nicely countering this with the more comical relationship between an embattled but rather jaded and co-dependent couple.

More crucially, under the graceful, understated direction of Michael Ehrman -- with a large, first-rate pit orchestra conducted by Lawrence Rapchak, some winning circus work courtesy of the Actors' Gymnasium, zesty choreography by Stacey Flaster, and an appealing cast comprised of both talented newcomers and veteran performers -- the show's tender heart and steely backbone are well balanced. The production might have benefitted from some good nips and tucks in the book. But even as it proceeds in its rather meandering way, it exerts a steady magic.

It all begins as a recently orphaned and terribly naive young girl, Lili (Rekha Rangarajan), arrives at the fairgrounds to seek out the concessions owner who was her father's friend. She is in search of a home, but the man she seeks turns out to have died, and Lili finds herself all alone in a callous world.

The carnival is a pretty threadbare operation. But it seems wholly fantastic to Lili, who begs for a job of any kind. The various wolves in men's clothing who are part of the troupe eventually oblige, each seeing an innocent Red Riding Hood for the taking. Chief among them is Marco the Magician (Michael Gerhart, a fine mix of the flamboyant and the pathetically needy), the compulsive womanizer. His longtime mistress and assistant, Rosalie (Susie McMonagle, all deliciously brassy comic energy tinged with a Susan Sarandon-like older woman seductiveness), knows precisely what he's up to.

Marco's attention turns to rage when Lili messes up his act.

After he tosses her out, she even contemplates suicide. (Whoever said Broadway was a happy place?) Endearing if slightly dim, the girl is wooed back to life by the winning creatures of the puppet theater and their hidden puppeteer, the bitter and forbidding Paul (Rod Thomas). A handsome young man crippled in the war and robbed of his dancing career, Paul is "the monster" who is hopelessly in love with Lili, but who terrorizes her rather than woos her because he cannot bear that she is besotted with Marco. The only friend either of these two lost souls has is the sweet and decent puppeteer Jacquot (a tremendously appealing, unforced performance by Gary Alexander), who watches over them like a brother.

The fresh face in the cast is Rangarajan, a slip of a girl with huge eyes, a great sweep of dark hair and a truly innocent way about her. A recent Roosevelt University music school grad, she has a warm, beautifully clear, semi-operatic soprano, and a totally unfussy acting style that fits her character's simple nature. It will be most interesting to see where Rangarajan goes from here. But here she holds the stage throughout, whether singing the show's anthem, "Love Makes the World Go 'Round," or the touching "Mira," or interacting with the puppets.

To the role of Paul, a sort of European version of "Carousel's" Billy Bigelow, Rod Thomas (who made such a mark in "Big" at Drury Lane Oakbrook Terrace several years back) brings a commanding presence. Tall, dark and handsome in a kind of southern Italian way, he has a rich, expressive voice shown to full dramatic effect in the aria-like "Her Face."

"Carnival" -- with superb sets by Michael Lasswell and a huge parade of glittery costumes by Elizabeth Shaffer -- is part of Light Opera Works' 25th anniversary season. It runs for a total of just six performances -- a ridiculously short life span, given the monumental amount of work involved.

Caption: Rod Thomas (from left), Rekha Rangarajan and Michael Gerhart star in Light Opera Works' production of "Carnival."

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