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Musical delusions, played for sympathy

By Wendy Rosenfield
For The Philadelphia Inquirer

These days, we would call her an outsider artist, but in the 1940s, Florence Foster Jenkins, the 60-ish society eccentric whose musical career is chronicled in Media Theatre's production of Stephen Temperley's *Souvenir*, was regarded as a one-of-a-kind oddball spectacle, the William Hung of her day.

Her intimate "concerts," first attended by close friends, widened in scope as word of her melodic, um, talents, spread.

Jenkins, who believed she compared favorably with the world's great sopranos, regaled her audiences with ridiculous costumes, onstage histrionics as she clumsily acted out the lyrics to her chosen tunes, and a voice so startlingly awful that those who came to hear her were often moved to stuff handkerchiefs in their mouths to stifle their laughter. She soon moved the show to Manhattan's Ritz-Carlton, and finally, at the peak of her renown, sold out an evening at Carnegie Hall, where one critic proclaimed her "queen of the sliding scale."

Souvenir recounts Jenkins' rise to fame through the memories of her longtime accompanist Cosme McMoon, a pianist who begins his employment to collect an easy paycheck and becomes as invested in maintaining Jenkins' delusion as Jenkins herself. Carl Danielsen's McMoon is understated - plagued by doubt, motivated by self-interest, his disdain for his employer slowly ceding to something resembling respect for her unflagging confidence. He brings a cabaret-confessional quality to the story, moving gently between dialogue with the audience, dialogue with Ann Crumb's Jenkins, and the grand piano he plays throughout the show.

Barrymore winner Crumb has what must be the sincere pleasure of portraying the chanteuse, and goes for it with all the twitchy, wild-eyed brio she can muster. Director Jesse Cline has a light touch, sensibly allowing Crumb to indulge herself and Danielsen to mute himself as needed, the play rolling along in a natural rhythm as the balance of power between the characters constantly tips and shifts.

However, when Jenkins' self-imposed blinders are briefly removed at Carnegie Hall during a rendition of the "Ave Maria," the moment is shattering. Maggie Baker-Atkins' costumes are fun and quirky without being too outlandish, except when they need to be. John Hobbie's unimaginative and slightly sloppy set design mars the show, though it is lit beautifully by Troy Martin-O'Shia. Keith M. Davis' sound design includes an actual recording of Jenkins, and, happily, none of the other audio issues that have plagued Media this season.

Souvenir

Written by Stephen Temperley, directed by Jesse Cline, scenery by John Hobbie, costumes by Maggie Baker-Atkins, sound by Keith M. Davis, lighting by Troy Martin-O'Shia.

The cast:

Ann Crumb.....Florence Jenkins

Carl Danielsen. . . Cosme McMoon

Playing at: Media Theatre, 104 E. State St., Media, through Feb. 17.

Tickets are \$ 22 to \$39.

Information: 610-891-0100 or www.MediaTheatre.org.