

ARTS + ENTERTAINMENT

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Encore by the unflappably off-key Florence Jenkins

By Wendy Rosenfield

For The Inquirer

Six months ago, when Media Theatre mounted Stephen Temperley's 2005 musical, *Souvenir*, artistic director Jesse Cline heard calls for an encore. So the suburban company has brought this quirky, endearing production to the Wilma Theater's stage, with the Wilma ponying up half its production costs. Barrymore winner Ann Crumb returns as the irrepressible Florence Foster Jenkins, and Larry Daggett steps into Carl Danielsen's former spot as Jenkins' longtime accompanist, Cosme McMoon.

All this effort is conducted in the service of the show's subject, Madame Flo, wartime society songbird. Jenkins' legendary coloratura soprano made her a bird of a rather peculiar feather. She took on some of opera's most complex arias and defeated every one with her customary tone-, pitch-, and rhythm-deaf squeaks and squawks. Her recitals at Manhattan's Ritz-Carlton ballroom were filled to capacity with friends and curiosity-seekers often forced to flee the room lest she see them burst into hysterics.

She recorded several albums (audience, take note: When Crumb lowers the phonograph arm, that's really Jenkins' voice you're hearing), and her reputation, such as it was, grew until one evening in 1944 when she accomplished the unthinkable: a Carnegie Hall sell-out.

Jenkins' story is told from the perspective of Mr. McMoon - himself something of a songwriting hack - from his initial shock at hearing her "sing" to his ultimate respect for her powers of self-delusion and self-preservation in the face of all contrary evidence. It's a quintessentially American tale.

The show's translation to the Avenue of the Arts is not entirely seamless. The Wilma's house is more intimate than Media's, and its setting does less service to John Hobbie's set. Where the audience previously looked up at a proscenium stage, it now peers down on a badly scuffed and nondescript floor - not exactly evocative of an elegant Ritz apartment - which could have been easily remedied with the addition of parquet or a few strategically placed Oriental rugs. However, Troy Martin-O'Shia's lighting is still golden and Maggie Baker-Atkins' costumes, at least, hit all the right notes.

Though Daggett is amiable, he is given to mugging, which, when paired with Crumb's (entirely appropriate) melodrama, throws off their delicate balance and becomes tiresome during her Carnegie spectacle. Daniel-sen's McMoon added a quiet discretion that never competed with Jenkins, only supported her.

Still, Crumb's interpretation of Jenkins' off-kilter mannerisms and casual relationship with reality is even better from this vantage point. When, at the show's conclusion, she's allowed to throw off her worldly shackles and release the voice Jenkins believed she possessed, the moment is gorgeous and glorious, tragic and triumphant.

Souvenir

Through June 29 at the Wilma Theater, 265 S. Broad St. Tickets: \$40-\$52. Information: 215-546-7824 or www.WilmaTheater.org.