

Director adds unexpected touches to a classic

by Mark Lord, Chronicle Contributor | Posted: Thursday, March 15, 2012 12:00 pm

Is “A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum” the funniest musical-comedy ... ever? The question is rhetorical, but it seems true that no matter how many times the show is mounted, it never fails to score in the laugh department.

The comedy’s latest incarnation is on view at Marathon Jewish Community Center in Douglaston, where it opened for a six-performance run Saturday night.

With a script by Burt Shevelove and Larry Gelbart, the musical is an intricately-woven masterpiece that tells the tale of a slave named Pseudolus, who wants just one thing: his freedom. Laced with a lively, often underappreciated score and truly hilarious lyrics by the always clever Stephen Sondheim, the show is a nonstop laughfest.

And one of the great beauties of “A Funny Thing” is that it allows fortremendous leeway in its staging, replete as it is with opportunities for sight gags, surprises (even for the already initiated) and directorial flourishes throughout.

The musical originally premiered on Broadway in 1962, and marked Sondheim’s first Broadway foray as both a lyricist and composer — he had previously written lyrics for such musicals as “West Side Story” and “Gypsy.” “A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum” proved to be a major success, and won several Tony awards.

The Douglaston production is directed by Barbara Auriemma, who has assembled an especially large cast, having added several additional cameo roles for some scene-stealing veterans. And while the pacing was a bit leisurely on opening night, Auriemma elicited chuckles in some unexpected places.

Practically walking away with the evening is a trio of resourceful gentlemen, known collectively as the Proteans, who, as described in the musical, are “only three, yet they do the work of thirty.”

They are played by Andrew Anton, Frank Auriemma and Richard Carlan, who are, in a word, tireless. One of them, a rubber-faced marvel who resembles Marty Feldman, is particularly invaluable.

Among the other delights is Dave Shapiro, Marathon Little Theatre Group’s long-standing erstwhile director, who has been written into the show as a nearly wordless, more-than-slightly inebriated soldier. He has honed the character to perfection.

And Sandi Plotkin, the show’s producer, appears as Antiqua, a courtesan with a half century of experience under her belt. In a role that replaces Gymnasia, normally played by an actress of amazonian proportions, she assumes other characteristics here that work, despite all the improbabilities.

As Vibrata, another one of the available ladies, Ashley Taylor is dynamic, with her catlike moves and startling afro hairstyle.

In the marathon (pardon the expression) role of Pseudolus, one of the musical theater's greatest male characters, Chazmond J. Peacock struts about with the confidence that his surname would suggest. Having played the role before, he is totally comfortable on stage.

His cohort, Hysterium, is played by David Risley, who has a fine singing voice but demonstrates little of the character's anticipated histrionics.

Vocal honors of the night go to Scott Eckers, who sings the role of Hero beautifully.

He is nicely paired with Annice Auriemma (whose family is well represented in the show), who plays the IQ-challenged virgin, Philia, with an interesting deadpan.

Lloyd Baum is the dirty old man, Senex, and Kat Thompson is his suspicious wife, Domina. Each brings a distinct personality to the stage, but they make an admittedly oddly matched couple.

Gary Kringsman has fun as the "buyer and seller of the flesh of beautiful women," while Sam Zuckerman lacks bravado as the warrior Miles Gloriosus. Bob Alpert, playing Erronius, a befuddled old man mandated to walk seven times around the seven hills of Rome, brings his own spin to the role, employing an accent that suggests he might have taken a short detour through the Catskills.

Rhea Arkin takes a lucky thirteenth turn as Marathon's musical director, leading a band that consists of Vicki Gleicher, Richard Shapiro, Jenny Li and Sam Hoyland. Linda Cashman's simple set and Pauline Baratta's costumes are apropos.

'A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum'

When: March 17 and 24 at 8 p.m.

March 18 and 25 at 3 p.m.

Where: Marathon Jewish Community Center, 245-37 60 Ave., Douglaston

Tickets: \$18 for adults; \$16 for seniors, children under 13

(718) 229-4644