

The Fantasticks: brilliant simplicity and classical appeal

By Sharon Grobliski
Standard Correspondent

First of all, everything about Artstree's current production, *The Fantasticks*—every single thing—is totally delightful. This show is sparkly, uplifting, and entirely satisfying. That it remains remarkable even to us who have seen countless productions of the show and who know the score by heart is a tribute both to the brilliant simplicity and classical appeal of its script and songs and to Artstree's talented cast and artistic direction.

The longest running show in the history of American musical theater, *The Fantasticks* was never a Broadway blockbuster, but instead ran for 42 years at the tiny 152 seat Sullivan Street Theater to make it the longest running musical in the world. Thirty years into the run, Sullivan Street was renamed *Fantasticks Way*.

Tom Jones, who wrote the book and the lyrics and Harvey Schmidt who wrote the music have created a work that is both classical and innovative. Based on a classical work by Edmond Rostand, the story is about two fathers who wanted their children to fall in love and marry each other. To accomplish this, they built a wall between their properties and forbade their children to see each other, knowing that the way to get a child to do something is to tell him not to do it.

The writers' intention was to create a play that exalted both simplicity and sophistication. The set is a bare stage with a small platform and two poles from which hangs a tattered drape proclaiming the play's title. A large prop box is the rest of the set. Actors enter during the overture and remove the drape, set a bench in place, and pull costumes from the prop box and don them. One character practices his juggling skills and, in an ending perfectly timed to the signature last bars of the music, tosses them, one at a time into a bag held by an actor across the set.

El Gallo (played by Scott Moreau) begins the play with the signature song, "Try To Remember." The song sets the mood for the theme of the play, which is the journey from the callow youthfulness of our Septembers to the maturity that comes from life's experiences and the realization that "without a hurt, the heart is hollow." El Gallo is a narrator in the style of the Stage Manager in *Our Town*. He is ever-present and sometimes part of the plot, sometimes an observer/commentator.



1. Local actor Collen Doyle (Mortimer) and Broadway veteran Ken Prymus (Henry) show Scott Moreau (El Gallo) how they will stage a dramatic "abduction." 2. Sarah Lasko (Luisa) and James Rio (Bellomy) share a father/daughter moment. 3. The cast of Artstree Music Theatre Festival's production of "The Fantasticks" at the Grange Theatre, beginning clockwise, with Renée Kathleen Koher seated in the center, Lasko, Michael McAssey, Rio, Moreau, Prymus, Doyle and Nick Kuhn. 4. New York cabaret performer McAssey and Rio play two fathers who hire El Gallo (Moreau, center) to stage a ruse to trick their children. 5. Pianist and Artistic Director Josh D. Smith and Harpist Tomina Parvanova accompany Artstree Music Theatre Festival's production of *The Fantasticks*.

Photos by Marie Cole of Artstree



We meet the other characters as El Gallo introduces them—a Boy, a Girl, Two Fathers, and a Wall. The Wall is a Mute, complete with top hat and worn jacket. Some productions make the Mute into a mime with traditional white face and mime-like movements. I like that this production did not go that direction, but allowed the mute to express silent approval or disapproval or to remain a neutral part of the plot. Renée Kathleen Koher does a great job in this role.

The fathers played by Michael McAssey, as Hucklebee, The Boy's Father, and James Rio, as Bellomy, The Girl's Father, are wonderful! The timing of their interplay, their rich harmonies and vibrant voices, and their

characterizations, which are both theatrical and real (part of the intended dichotomy) are perfect. They are each solidly-fleshed individuals, but they operate as one synchronized unit.

The girl, Luisa, played by Sarah Lasko, is sixteen years old, a hopeless romantic, who dreams of going to town in a golden gown and of being "kissed upon the eyes," begs in her opening song/soliloquy, "Please, God, please! Don't let me be normal!" Lasko nails it. She is sweet and quirky and over-the-top with enthusiasm. We love every bit of her. The singing role that is Luisa's is exceedingly challenging and Lasko is totally up to the task. Her voice takes on an aura of sweet simplicity in

her songs and facile virtuosity in the coloratura above El Gallo in "Round and Round." The purity and clarity of her voice is enchanting and enriching.

Nick Kuhn plays the part of the boy, Matt, with integrity and artifice. Both are required in the script, but it is a difficult balance and Kuhn manages both with finesse. He has a clear, earnest voice that draws us in so that we entirely believe in his sincerity and earnestness.

El Gallo is played by Scott Moreau. He is entirely sincere. There is no artifice to his performance. His delivery of the poetic narration of the play is real. It hits us right in our very being. It is so on the mark it makes us weep in joy, in sorrow

for our lost youths, in our understanding, through his words of the human condition. His voice is rich and mellow and exactly what is called for in the role.

The first act ends with an abduction staged by the fathers. To accomplish this, the fathers hire an Old Actor, Henry (Played by Ken Prymus), and his assistant, Mortimer (Collen Doyle) who specializes in dying. These two are over the top! Henry is the ultimate ham, and Prymus hams it up gloriously. At Henry's urging, Mortimer demonstrates a dying scene to convince the fathers to hire him. He is absolutely hilarious. His facial expressions and his pantomime of a surprise attack and the subsequent death would win a silent movie Academy Award! Prymus and Doyle play off each other beautifully and steal the show.

The musicians, Harpist Tomina Parvanova and Pianist and Musical Director, Josh Smith, made us think there was a full orchestra present.

The director, Gary John LaRosa is also the choreographer. He has lived and breathed this show for many years, and so he has brought, with perfect integrity and loyal steadfastness, the same show he saw at the Sullivan Street Playhouse, and he has brought it forward with the love of what the show is and what it always should be, along with some very nice choreography. And that was the perfect thing to do.