

“42nd Street” is frothy fun



Photos by Christopher Clark

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When the very opening number proves to be a wall-to-wall, tap-happy showstopper that makes you want to leap to your feet, you know you're in for a great time. Such is “42nd Street,” the cherry on top of the cake of Music Theatre Wichita's 43rd season.

The show is based on the old 1933 Ruby Keeler/Dick Powell movie about a fresh-faced kid who steps off the bus in New York and rises from the chorus to become an overnight star in a Big Broadway Show. It's the ultimate Cinderella story, powered along by the hummable vintage songbook of Harry Warren and Al Dubin, from “You're Getting to be a Habit With Me” to “We're in the Money” to “Lullaby of Broadway” and the rousing title tune. This is the dreamy fantasy stuff that made the Depression survivable, now translated to the stage for nostalgic thrills.

Directed and choreographed by Jon Engstrom, a member of the original 1980 Broadway cast who helmed the show in Wichita twice before in 1989 and 1998, with his longtime associate Hector Guerrero, this production is bright, snappy, glittery, gaudy, frothy, filmy fun. It is also a glorious exercise in lock-step, “A Chorus Line” precision.

Using the template of original director/choreographer Gower Champion, Engstrom admirably recreates Busby Berkeley-like stage routines from 1930s movie musicals that were, of course, actually impossible to do on stage. There's even one where the chorus girls lie on the floor making patterns, but, sadly, there's no giant mirror overhead to give us the full effect.

Debbie Roberts' colorful, elaborately coordinated costumes – such as guys' vests and hatbands matching the rainbow hues of the gals' gorgeous get-ups, from silky PJs to slinky gowns -- set the dazzling, eye-popping standard right from the beginning. Bruce Brockman's sleek, art-moderne sets, showcased by David Neville's flattering lighting, create an inviting fantasy world for us to play in for a couple of hours.

But it is the enthusiastically able cast, including the 30-plus chorus boys and girls who all seem capable of stepping into the star's spotlight at a moment's notice, that bring the real thrills.

Tessa Grady, making her MTWichita debut, is a beautifully winsome Peggy Sawyer, the naïve small-town girl with big Broadway dreams. Grady has a perky soprano and an engaging manner, but she proves that her feet should probably be registered as formidable weapons capable of tapping with machine-gun staccato precision. Her "audition" is a hilarious highlight.

Shonn Wiley, an MTWichita alumnus who was on Broadway in the Tony-winning 2001 revival of this show, plays Billy Lawlor, a handsome, full-of-himself Broadway juvenile who steps up to befriend Peggy and show her the ropes – and hopefully something more personal. Wiley's strong, clear tenor meshes beautifully with Grady for the "Young and Healthy" meet-cute duet, and then commands the center of attention for the "Dames" and "We're in the Money" extravaganzas.

Damon Kirsche, who is becoming a favorite MTWichita leading man after being King Arthur in "Camelot" and Henry Higgins in "My Fair Lady," exudes debonair elegance as Julian Marsh, a famous Broadway showman and star-maker. Kirsche's powerful baritone croons the classic "Lullaby of Broadway" and gives a quietly emotional punch to the coda of the "42nd Street" finale.

Tracy Lore ("The Drowsy Chaperone," last year's American premiere of "Betty Blue Eyes") is glamorous and appropriately haughty as Dorothy Brock, the show-within-a-show's star who worries about being overtaken by someone younger. Lore has a deliciously wry, richly sexy quality to her singing and sly comic timing as a not-quite-villainess.

Amy Baker Schwiethale is a wisecracking firecracker as showgirl Anytime Annie, Peggy's cynical sidekick, and Jacob Chancellor is a powerful hoofer as dance captain Andy, who makes the intricate steps look easy. And music director Thomas W. Douglas conducts an orchestra with no strings to give a Big Band-era sound full of class, brassy horns and mellow, swooning saxes.

