BRUNSWICK — I never enter the Maine State Music Theater alone. Always, skipping alongside, in her best Gunne Sax dress, is my nine-year-old self, whose first theater experience was as an audience member of the 1976 Brunswick Music Theater production of “Fiddler on the Roof.” That day, she was hooked - on theater, and on that magical space, where her family held season tickets for decades.

I worried a bit that my tendency to reminisce might get in the way of reviewing Maine State Music Theatre’s 2015 season objectively. I’m always looking for Bernard Wurger and KK Preece. I needn’t have worried.

“The Full Monty” is a fun, naughty, playful, heartfelt piece of feel-good theater. This show is about the characters and they take center stage.

Peter Matthew Smith was well cast and embodies “Everyman” in the lead role of Jerry Lukowski. There are stereotypical themes as he struggles to find work and risks losing custody of his son to his ex-wife and her new “perfect” man. Jerry is the team leader and instigator of the plot – he’s hot-headed and rash and a little two dimensional for much of the show – until a wrenching scene with his son tucked in on a pull-out sofa – such a convincing moment of choking and tearing up. I give extra credit for real tears on demand.

Audiences have favorites. Especially character actors they have seen before. Like Wurger’s first appearance in “Kiss Me Kate” or “Guys and Dolls,” when...
they step onstage – in character – there is a moment of unspoken greeting between the actor and the audience.

It’s a moment of recognizing and greeting an old friend, a split second before the actor rolls on with the latest character and after a few moments of external and internal tittering, the audience suspends their disbelief, and embraces this new role.

Charis Leos, in her 17th MSMT production has that relationship in a reprisal of the role of Georgie, which she also played at MSMT in 2006. She is the quintessential sassy, spirited, bawdy, loving wife to Dave Bukatinsky, played by Jayson Elliott.

Dave is another audience favorite, the classic best friend to Jerry, the loving husband to Georgie, an actor who plays to the audience without upstaging his castmates and who is adept at physical humor - from dancing, to thrusts to thong-twirling.

Leos and Elliott are comfortable and believable as a couple and add depth to the occasional moments of pathos in this primarily upbeat comedy.

Another audience favorite was Chuck Ragsdale in a reprisal of his 2006 role. His portrayal of Malcolm as the sweet, awkward, unintentionally amusing night watchman was endearing and you could sense the audience pulling for him.

It’s a cast full of strong performances. Kingsley Leggs brings a depth of experience and talent that is palpable in his portrayal of “Horse” Simmons. Jonathan Rayson and Laurie Wells do a great job of portraying their individual characters, as well as a symbiotic portrayal of their roles and unique “couplessness” as Harold and Vicki Nichols.

Rounding out the Hot Metal dancers is Seth Danner as Keno Walsh. His is a light and comedic role that adds to the layers of humor, especially in the group scenes. He has a repetitive bit which is a little wearing, but it’s a show mechanic and in a show that intersperses realism with a stylized set and characters, it’s to be expected.

Sandy Rosenberg, as the rhinestone-studded vaudevillian piano player stole the show. In the best sense.

My issues with the show were few, but worth noting.

During the opening number and a dance studio number, I found the music (from the talented orchestra) to be a bit loud, which made cast lines difficult to hear clearly.

I had a difficulty suspending my disbelief in a scene when the women are interacting together in the bathroom – Georgie was right on as a steel worker’s wife on the town in jeans and a blouse, but there was something incongruous with the younger dolled up woman who seemed more dressed for clubbing with 20 somethings. It was as if a choice could be made in the style of dress and age portrayal for this group, but instead two choices were merged. It was one of the few places that pulled me out of the story and into critique.

During this scene, there was an unfortunate bit of blocking where Dave and Jerry are hiding in a stall and Dave, who I’m sure was reacting to all that he was hearing, could not be seen by the stage-right audience.

I haven’t talked about music. I’m not an aficionado – so if someone is off key – I may not be able to tell you. If someone was obviously the weak link, I would. Not the case. It’s MSMT – they hire wonderfully talented singers, dancers and musicians. And they did not disappoint.

There is a lot of fantastic choreography, the most fun of which was a scene where the guys and their “strip” choreography really clicked. We, as the audience, were all in. As we watched them struggle and it started to come together, we were championing them.

It’s not perfect. It’s live theater. Things happen. There were lights up when they shouldn’t have.

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