

Loft stage hums with 'Under Construction' series

Burt Saidel



Better late than never? That was an oft-told lesson of my youth. Now, I have to put it into practice.

This summer began with one of the busiest arts' calendars in recent memory. Cincinnati Opera ended their season of triumphs while several Dayton area theaters were mounting festivals.

Fortunately, we were able to attend many of the offerings. What became a problem was column space to report the experiences to my dear readers. With apologies to all, particularly the fine casts of the plays, I am reporting on two productions which occurred nearly a month ago. I hope that my mother was right – "Better late than never!"

The Human Race Theatre Company brings the highest quality professional theater to its Loft stage. It also educates future audiences and actors with its far-reaching programs and encourages new authors and producers by staging its "Under Construction" series annually.

Under Construction is a series of staged readings of plays in the midst of the creative process. The ultimate "under construction" is the Teen/Lovewell show which puts a bunch of youngsters on a stage with the task of writing, staging and acting their creation in the short space of three weeks. This year's teen play, *Superpowerless*, engaged the customary fantasy world of creative youth under time pressure.

Unfortunately, I was unable to see the play but can assure all that it was a delightful flight of fancy. Of the series, I was able to see *The Trimble Wars* by the creative team of Patrick Vaughn and Sean Michael Flowers. They are best remembered

for Prometheus Dreams presented here in 2001.

Since then, they have managed to keep a bi-coastal creative effort alive and well. They have musicals, songs, and plays in various stages of development. This year, *The Trimble Wars* emerged as a full fledged musical drama. The music was, typical of Sean Michael, exciting and delightful. His music is immediately lovable and when you realize that he is playing the entire score on an upright piano, you can only imagine what it will be when orchestrated.

The lyrics, like the music, are clever and catchy. The only problem was the entire focus of the play – Soap Operas. Director Kevin Moore assembled a dream cast led by such stars as Scott Stoney, Aaron Vega, Patricia Linhart, Jamie Cordes, J.J. Tiemeyer and Reneé Franck-Reed. Add young hopefuls and newcomers – Alexandra Finke, Diana Michelle Griffith, Kristen Hurley, Will Hutcheson and James Roselli – and you have an "A" team.

For me, the problem was, I don't care about the trials and tribulations of a soap opera cast or a soap opera. Fun things happened on stage so perhaps I have to watch one of those "things" to get into the spirit.

Vandalia Youth Theatre's *Les Miserables*

The same weekend gave me one of the most satisfying surprises imaginable. The Vandalia Youth Theatre Company performs at Smith Middle School in Vandalia. They assemble young talent from far and wide in the same spirit as the Muse Machine.

The have two productions. The little kids did Annie and the high schoolers performed *Les Miserables*. I was able to see "Les Miz" and found it to be a transporting experience.

Director Michael Wadham, a budding force in local theater, has no fear. Tackling one of the great

musicals, *Les Misérables*, is no small undertaking. Michael was able to infuse his large talented cast and crew with the fire needed for this landmark retelling of the Victor Hugo classic.

Played on a small stage – the actors overflowed onto the auditorium floor – the excitement never abated. Each of the characters, and these are kids, managed to portray literary giants.

The complex music was supplied by a 14 piece orchestra. The songs were largely accompanied by the piano and a few strings for balance. The pianist, Elise Cheatwood, was nothing short of sensational. Bound for Bowling Green to study music education, she has a great gift.

Simply outstanding were: Noah Berry as Jean Valjean and Oakwood's Coleman Hemsath as his nemesis, Javert. They lived their parts and infused the play with real life and purpose.

Rebecca Ruttler was the tragic Fantine. She brought great powers to her role including the iconic song, "I Dreamed a Dream." Other Oakwood students featured were Krista Weltner and Tyler Rife as the comedy relief Thenardiers, and Joanna Draper, Katie Mauch and Allie Elder as stunning Eponine and Cosette and "Lovely Lady #1."

The handsome lover Marius was perfectly cast by handsome Trevor Coran. Jay Richardson and Kyle Himsforth made an impressive pair with real musical theatre voices and stage presences.

The spirit of the performances blazed with the stirring anthems "Red" and "Do You Hear the People Shout." I have heard opera performances with less fervor and conviction.

My congratulations to the Vandalia Youth Theatre. We will see many of these talented performers in this summer's Muse Machine production. You will read about that next week – I promise!

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