

Theater review - 'Crazy' is an old-fashioned good time

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Opera House Theatre Co.'s charming production of the musical romantic comedy "Crazy For You" is like spending time with a favorite old (read: pre-WWII) movie.

It may be dated, but it's got a heartbeat we can connect to.

"Crazy For You," which runs at Thalian Hall through July 26, marks an entertaining return to the fold for Charlotte-based director and choreographer Ron Chisholm, helming his first Opera House show since 2012. Filled with big, splashy production numbers as well as the indelible songs of George and Ira Gershwin, "Crazy For You," which enjoyed a four-year Broadway run in the middle '90s, also features very good performances by some of Wilmington's finest musical theater talent.

The story, largely based on the 1930 Gershwin musical "Girl Crazy," follows the forced wanderings of Bobby Child (Jason Aycock), a wanna-be dancer whose overbearing mother (Fran Keenan Tabor, not that overbearing), wants him to go into the family banking business. Bobby really doesn't want to, but he *really* doesn't want to marry Irene Roth (Courtney Poland), the very rich, extremely pushy socialite he's been engaged to for five years despite his best efforts to escape her clutches.

And so, after Bobby's dancing career goes "poof" when he annoys the impresario Bela Zangler (Richard Bunting, playing a stand-in for Florenz Ziegfield) with over-eagerness for the last time, Bobby runs off to Nevada under threat of having his allowance cut off by Mommy to foreclose on a crumbling theater in the dead-end town of Deadrock.

Terry Collins' Wild West set suggests that Deadrock is not far removed from a ghost town, and it swivels in a way that requires choreographed movements from its performers, who follow the saloon doors across the stage as the the scenes change from outdoors to in. It's a nice effect.

In Deadrock, Bobby falls for the only woman in town, Polly Baker (Kendra Goehring-Garrett), whose widower father -- a lovable, handlebar-mustache-wearing romantic played to the hilt by William Fleming -- owns the theater Bobby's supposed to be foreclosing on. When Polly figures out who Bobby is and what he's doing there, he concocts an insane scheme to impersonate Zangler, who's one of Polly's idols, while somehow importing to Nevada Zangler's showgirls, who Bobby's friendly with, and cooking up a crazy case of mistaken identity.

Aycock, who's also the assistant director and choreographer, isn't a flashy performer. More importantly, though, he is eminently likable and has the rare ability to make whatever he's doing on stage appear effortless; he fits the role of Bobby Child like an



Kelby Wingert/StarNews Media
Kendra Goehring-Garrett and Jason Aycock star in "Crazy For You."

old-school glove. In "Crazy For You," he tap-dances gracefully with a backing chorus of showgirls through "I Can't Be Bothered Now," sings pleasantly in both solos and duets -- he and Goehring-Garrett's matter-of-fact take on "Embraceable You" is particularly nice -- and is plenty funny. When the local, tightly harmonizing layabouts -- Bradley Barefoot, Sloan Friedman and Brad Mercier, singing beautifully on "Bidin' My Time" and "The Real American Folk Song" -- express doubts at Bobby's idea to save the theater by putting on show, he chastises them with, "Don't you ever go to the movies? Mickey Rooney does it all the time," a rare instance of the show commenting on its own lunacy.

As Polly, Goehring-Garrett comes off like a girl who's been raised by men but who still has plenty of rough-hewn feminine charm. She adopts a corn-pone accent and stiff, jerky movements while showing her great talent for comedy, especially during one sequence when Polly displays her hard-drinking, cork-spitting ways. Goehring-Garrett drops all that during her songs, however -- it's like a glimpse at Polly's inner life -- and lets her extraordinary voice take center stage on the beautiful "Someone to Watch Over Me" while having fun with the jumpy "I Got Rhythm."

As for chemistry, the sparks don't exactly fly off the stage, but for a chaste romance like "Crazy For You" a couple of kisses is all that's needed for us to get the point.

The leads have plenty of support from the rest of the cast. As Bobby's would-be fiancée, a vamping Poland convincingly creates a flinty character who's the polar opposite of the warm girl next door she played a couple of months ago in "Singin' in the Rain" for the Thalian Association, even if the scene during which Polly and Irene trade insults feels a little off. Chris Rickert blows through his scenes with red-faced bluster as Lank, the saloon owner who's got his eye on Polly; Bunting shares a great, extended comic sequence with Aycock (in disguise as Zangler) during "What Causes That?", in which they drunkenly mirror each other's movements; and Beth Swindell steals scenes as Patsy, a blonde, Betty-Boop-like dancer who tries to teach Deadrock's hapless cowpokes how to move.

The technical support is top-notch, too, from Chisholm's punchy choreography (professionally executed by such dancers as Brooklynne Williamson and Blaine Allen Mowrer) and Debbie Scheu's fantastic costumes, which span 1930s nightlife to Western wear, to Lorene Walsh's band, which does a solid job in delivering the familiar Gershwin tunes. Dallas LaFon's lighting stands out as well, especially during the number "Slap That Bass," during which dancing couples are doused in multi-colored lights.

Occasionally, "Crazy For You" suffers from feeling patched together, probably because most of the songs were originally written for other musicals. Ultimately, however, much like one of your favorite old movies, "Crazy For You" is a show that's easy to love, with minor flaws that are just as easy to forgive.

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