



Hard-boiled musical 'City of Angels' is smartly entertaining

Wednesday Posted at 11:00 AM

If you want to see 'City of Angels,' and it's worth a look, you've got three more chances. The show closes Sept. 11.

By John Staton StarNews Staff

Plenty has been written about the plight of the screenwriter's life, much of it centering on the inherent conflict between artistic integrity and the movie-making money machine. And while it's kinda tough to drum up much sympathy for those who willingly throw themselves into the maw of Hollywood, the musical "City of Angels," which **Opera House Theatre Co. is staging at Thalian Hall through Sunday**, and which at one point likens all of Los Angeles to "a pretty girl with the clap," does a fine job of making the whole endeavor of selling your soul to the devil highly entertaining.

Sam Robison plays Stine, a successful novelist who's decided to give the movie biz a try by adapting for the screen his hard-boiled, complex crime mystery about a private eye searching for a missing heiress. Early on, however, Stine starts to wonder whether the money is worth it. Not only is he now all the way across the country from New York and his wife, Gabby (Kendra Goehring-Garrett), with whom he's developed some well-founded trust issues, but he's growing increasingly uncomfortable with the changes demanded by the producer and director of his script, Irwin S. Irving (an impressively mustachioed Justin Smith), changes that suck much of the life and most of the smarts out of it.

The conceit of the show has it flitting back and forth between the real world of Stine's life and the noir-hued "reel world" of his script, with characters occasionally meeting in the middle for a song. It's all very clever, and one gathers that Larry Gelbart, who wrote "Tootsie," among other hits, knows what he's talking about when it comes to studio honchos dumbing down his ideas.

"City of Angels" director Ray Kennedy has a rep as a song and dance man, and while that's something he does quite well this musical instead highlights his ability to get interesting characters out of his actors. There are a ton of good performances.

As Stone, Stine's alter ego and the femme-fatale-attracting P.I. at the heart of his twisty script, Ken Griggs commands the stage with a noble, tough-guy charm that's straight out of a film noir classic. Robison is nicely conflicted as a writer with high artistic standards but low moral ones, and if he lays it on pretty thick with "Funny," his big song in Act Two, his duet with Griggs at the end of Act One, "You're Nothing Without Me," is a highlight.

Goehring-Garrett is quite good as Stine's loving but skeptical wife, and proves a good lounge singer as Stone's lost love Bobbi during her tune "With Every Breath I Take." She also shares a snappy duet in "What You Don't Know About Women" with Heather Setzler, who plays Stone's dependable secretary, Oolie, as well as Irving's secretary, Donna. Setzler's shining moment comes during the jaunty "You Can Always Count on Me," when she switches between the two characters to good-naturedly decry her status as a good-natured doormat.

Caitlin Becka is pretty fetching as Mallory, a towel-clad rich girl on the lam (she also plays the ditzy, manipulative actress Avril, who plays Mallory in Stine's script). And Shannon Playl, who also plays Irving's wife, is intriguingly mysterious as Alaura Kingsley, the millionaire's wife whose visit to Stone's office starts him on his quest.

Smith nails movie mogul Irving's overbearing oiliness in his dealings with Stine, while David Autry steals scenes as Munoz, a detective who has it in for Stone.

There's not much dance to speak of, but music director Lorene Walsh's jazzy band sounds nice and full, and things are kept visually interesting by set designer Terry Collins' and costume designer Selina Harvey's ability to balance the "black

and white" scheme of the reel world vs. the color of the real world.

All in all it's like a cool old movie from the '40s mashed up with an artistic conundrum that feels surprisingly current.

Contact John Staton at 910-343-2343 or John.Staton@StarNewsOnline.com.

