

THEATER REVIEW | Musical Theater Heritage's 'Gypsy'

'Gypsy' will entertain you

Great performances in this concert production get to the heart of the acclaimed musical.

ROBERT TRUSSELL



RTRUSSELL@KCSTAR.COM

"Gypsy" is a musical held in high regard in some quarters and spoken of with a certain reverence that we reserve for works of transcendent power.

Without question, this show taken from the memoirs of striptease artist Gypsy Rose Lee is so well-crafted that admiring the dramatic writing of Arthur Laurents, the music of Jule Styne and the lyrics of Stephen Sondheim is only natural. And it creates great roles for skilled actors.

But I've always found this a tough show to warm up to. It's the story of an obsessed stage mother whose egomania drives her to bully, deny and neglect her children. There's just a little too much mental illness for my taste.

The Musical Theater Heritage concert production of the show, directed by Sarah Crawford, renders the piece fairly digestible, thanks in large part to gifted actors who honestly capture the emotional lives of these characters. The results are by turns poignant, amusing and disturbing.

Debra Bluford plays Mama Rose for the second time in her career and digs deep to capture a personality that simply can't be denied, no matter how repellent her behavior may be. Bluford, by virtue of her long career as a Kansas City stage actress who most often appears in comedies, easily earns an audience's good will, and that by itself makes this Mama Rose a little easier to take.

But Bluford is by no means coasting, nor is she falling back on comedy shtick. When she performs "Rose's Turn," her dramatically explosive show-stopper near the end of the piece, it's like watching a force of nature. The number is



PHOTO BY SHARON HARTER

Vanessa Severo, Deb Bluford, Kip Niven, Molly Denninghoff and cast take their bows after a standing ovation at Musical Theater Heritage's Saturday night performance of "Gypsy."

ONSTAGE

"Gypsy" runs through May 29 at the Off Center Theatre at Crown Center. Call 816-842-9999 or go to www.mthkc.com.

a bestial cry of narcissism, a sort of self-serving tantrum, but Bluford plays it with such conviction that it becomes a startling few minutes of theater.

Mama Rose's initial obsession is turning her daughter June (Molly Denninghoff) into a vaudeville star by putting June in insipid routines with other kids. After June flies the coop, Mama Rose refocuses her ambitious fantasies on June's older sister, Louise.

Louise, eventually becomes Gypsy Rose Lee, and any actress tackling the part has to convincingly make the transition from young innocent to a major star taking care of business. Vanessa Severo, in many ways ideally suited to the role, leads us through the character's changes without hitting a single false note. The seamless and subtle nature of this per-

formance is stunning.

When Louise as a kid sings "Little Lamb," a sort of lullaby, the effect is deeply moving. Later, when she's virtually forced onstage for her first performance as a stripper, Severo's face tells us that Louise understands instinctively how it will change her life — and how she feels about a mother who will never give her what she needs.

Kip Niven does exceptional work as Herbie, the manager who inexplicably falls in love with Rose, more or less at first sight. Niven makes Herbie's feelings for Rose — from what might be called seasoned infatuation to ultimate disillusionment — crystal clear. He's the embodiment of a decent man who does the best he can until he can do no more.

Denninghoff offers a nice turn as June, and Sam Cordes brings his customary charm and seemingly guileless acting style to the show as Tulsa, a young hoofer who marries June.

A comic highlight of any production of "Gypsy" is "You Gotta Have a Gimmick," performed by three strippers in a

Wichita burlesque house to educate Louise about the finer points of their profession. Kenzie West delivers a beautifully executed performance as Tessie Tura, a brash character with a good heart. Allison Moody brings crazed energy to the role of trumpet-playing Mazeppa and, in a wacky bit of stunt casting, David Ollington plays Electra, the stripper whose costume lights up as she performs.

The other members of this big cast give us nicely done supporting performances. On Saturday night the band — piano, drums, reeds, two trumpets and a trombone — sounded terrific most of the time but occasionally fell out of tune. And a technical costume glitch diluted the impact of a key scene in Act 2.

But for the most part this is another slick presentation by a company that makes concert performances as rewarding as — well, as seeing a fully mounted production. With no scenery, minimal props and simple costuming, Crawford and her actors make this "Gypsy" a memorable experience.