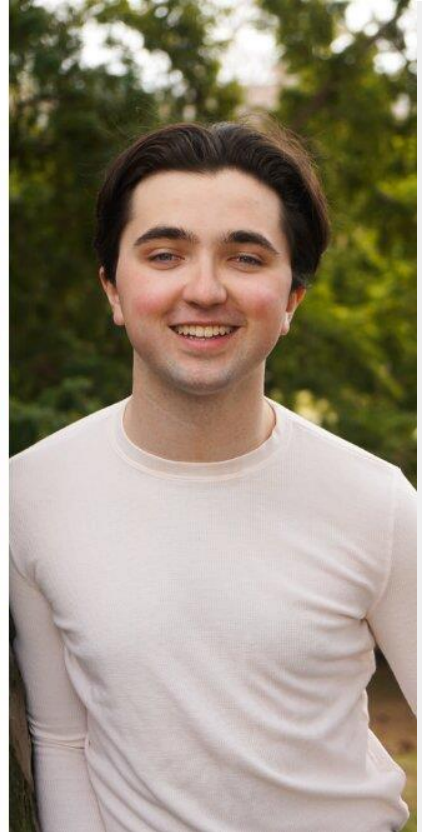


'Bright Star' is well worth seeing this weekend



Lane Straub as Margo, Madison LeMieux as Alice and Sebastian Barnett as Jimmy Ray in Michigan State University's production of "Bright Star."

COURTESY OF MSU DEPARTMENT OF THEATRE

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"BRIGHT STAR"

MSU Department of Theatre

April 21-13

8 p.m. Friday-Saturday

2 p.m. Saturday-Sunday

Wharton Center Pasant Theatre

750 E. Shaw Lane, East Lansing

517-432-2000

whartoncenter.com

Mark Gmazel

“Bright Star” is exactly the kind of show audiences love to see. The musical features a large, dynamic cast and a spacious, well-designed set that includes the active use of a trapdoor. The backdrop and story effectively evoke the locality and era of the show, which is set in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina in the mid-1940s, with flashbacks to 1923. Bluegrass music carries the action, and an energetic and partisan crowd of loved ones, classmates and community members provides a palpable boost.

The musical revolves around two pairs of lovers: Alice and Jimmy Ray, played by Madison LeMieux and Sebastian Barnett; and Margo and Billy, played by Lane Straub and Mark Zum Mallen. The cast is clearly well-prepared and navigates the stage layout effortlessly. They remember to cheat out, adjust and stay out of straight lines.

The spoken lines and singing are all clear, with good diction. There’s no difficulty following the plot because the intentions and objectives are clearly demonstrated, especially the honest relationships and deft comic timing in the bookstore and newspaper shop scenes.

Barnett was quite capable as the male lead, possessing a great country singing voice. LeMieux is asked to do a lot in this show, but she’s well-cast in her central role. Straub showed good acting instincts and a pretty voice, and Zum Mallen got stronger and stronger as the show progressed and will certainly benefit and grow from this production.

As Lucy, Sam Dobrowolski conveys warmth and charming sass while flashing an intuitive sense of comic timing, effectively expressing herself while also connecting with those around her. Jacob Squire, who plays the Mayor, is a strong physical and vocal presence and proves the value of featuring master of fine art students. He brings intensity to a difficult role.

Downright droll as Stanford, among his other characters, ensemble member Toby Sanders seems to embrace performance opportunities with a sense of joy and is

hard to miss in a crowd. All the ensemble members bring energy and focus to the stage and add a lot of interest and individuality in primarily non-speaking roles.

The production is well-matched to the students' talents and offers many memorable moments, but the snappy banter between Jimmy Ray, Stanford and the Mayor, as well as sharp comic moments between Lucy and ensemble character Quincy, are standout scenes.

The sound experience in the Pasant Theatre exceeds expectations. Kudos to the sound team, who take full advantage of a gorgeous Digicom soundboard, processing the vocals in perfect support of the singers. Here's hoping MSU will invest in an upgraded sound system sometime in the near future, but overall, all technical aspects are smooth and seamless.

Scene changes are also speedy and smooth, although the crew did set an armchair a few inches away from the spike marks on occasion. Hard work and preparation during tech week really paid off.

Overall, the show moves at a brisk clip and is well worth seeing this weekend. With a Tony-nominated score and a powerhouse cast, you won't be disappointed.