



Bright Star - MSU

4/20/2023

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Bright Star is both literally and figuratively a bright spot in MSU Theatre's season. Small, bright lights (stars?) were held, lifted and whirled around the stage as part of director/choreographer Brad Willcuts' vision for this new/old musical. It was written and composed in 2013 by Steve Martin and Edie Brickell, but is set in 1945-46 with flashbacks to 1923. The musical was inspired by the folk story told in the song "Iron Mountain Baby" on Martin and Bricknell's 2013 bluegrass album. It combines tragedy and redemption with our universal longing for love and family.

The set (Jordan House) lighting (Lilian Meyers) and costumes (Mona Jahani) met the challenge of this time-traveling, multi-scene project, transitioning smoothly and using tall brick archways and the trap door device in creative ways — with spooky "water based haze" (who "designs" that?) and evocative sound effects (Lucas Nunn). Music Director Dave Wendelberger leads an unseen orchestra — that does include a banjo — and serves the story well.

The plot takes some dark turns. The wild, young Alice (Madison DeMieux) "gets into trouble" in 1923 with that "wild kid" Jimmy Ray (Sebastian Barnett) and the fathers (Advait Rathi and Jacob Squire) do what "A Man's Gotta Do" with the accompanying regrets. In 1945, earnest, charming Billy (Mark Zum Mallen) returns from the war to find his mother has died — and struggles to launch a career as a writer. Director Willcuts calls the show "a poignant journey through the complexities of love, heartbreak, and redemption."

Madison sings and acts her heart out in the central role of Alice. (I'm reminded of the 2019 Thespie-Award-winning performance of the sensational Amanda Dekatch in Peppermint Creek's 2019 version of this show.) Jacob Squire overcomes my student-actors-are-too-young syndrome to bring believable gravitas to the guilt-ridden Mayor, father of Jimmy. Lane Straub is refreshingly genuine and charming as Margo, Billy's bookstore love interest. Josh Sowers and Samantha Dobrowolski add cute comic relief as Darryl and Lucy.

Kudos to the entire ensemble — especially for their dancing, which seemed at the same time appropriately old-fashioned yet fresh and innovative.

Bright Star continues though April 23 on the Pasant Stage of Wharton Center — with general seating, so get there early for the best seats — and to navigate Wharton Center Parking Ramp (\$10) which will also be busy with the cars of those attending TINA in the Great Hall. Tickets at <https://www.whartoncenter.com/events/detail/bright-star>