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Aerospace Players take on the challenge of `Producers'

By Jeff Favre Posted: 07/27/2010 05:42:18 PM PDT

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Questions/Answers

It's not hard to understand - if you put it in the context of the times - why Mel Brooks' 1968 comedy film "The Producers" was both a mainstream bust and derided by many critics as tasteless and vulgar.

It was, after all, a film that made light of Nazis, and joked about race, religion and sexual orientation.

But times change, and the 2001 stage musical adaptation earned 12 Tony Awards, ran for six years, and spawned another movie.

Times, it seems, have also changed for the Aerospace Players. With "The Producers," the company has for the first time in its more than two-decade history chosen a musical produced after 1990.

And even if the result is a mixed bag of performances and technical elements, it's nice to see the Players branch out beyond the old classics and opt for a new classic.

What works for this show is that director Steve Norris and his cast clearly are having fun with the ridiculous book (co-authored by Brooks and Thomas Meehan), and with Brooks' lighthearted songs. It's the lovable wackiness of Brooks, though, that causes most of the problems, because the Players cast - its pair of leads in particular - doesn't match the pace required to make lowbrow gags and broad humor zing. So the laughs are too far between to sustain a three-hour running time.

For those who haven't seen "The Producers" in any of its incarnations, the title refers to washed-up Broadway veteran Max Bialystock (Bob Minnichelli) and

nerdish accountant Leo Bloom (Joe Essner).

Thanks to Leo's offhand remark, Max gets the idea that the guys should team up to produce the world's worst musical and oversell shares in it to the elderly women whom Max has seduced to finance his previous projects. The show would flop, and with Leo cooking the books, the pair should make off with loads of cash.

And what could go wrong with the plan when the musical is "Springtime for Hitler," written by - and starring - a crazed Nazi named Franz Liebkind (J.C. Kern), and directed by the exceedingly effeminate and oblivious Roger De Bris (Jon Sparks), with help from his partner Carmen Ghia (Scott Clifford). Add the mindless Swede, Ulla (Jeanine Barba), as Eva Braun and you've got the recipe for disaster.

Much of the musical's dialogue comes from the original movie, with Max spouting Brooks' trademark rapid-fire one-liners about sex and Leo stammering along as the timid sidekick.

Minnichelli and Essner have chemistry as the oddball pair, but their give-and-take frequently is a beat too slow, and these punch lines only work if the audience doesn't have time to think.

Where this "Producers" hits its groove is in the scene involving Roger the director, thanks to a fearless turn by Sparks. From his first appearance in a full-length gown to the wild performance of the showstopping "Springtime for Hitler," Sparks takes the stereotyped "queen" to the limit.

Also funny is Kern, as the Nazi Franz, who trains Nazi pigeons and wears lederhosen. There's a maniacal bent to Kern's performance; he appears ready to throttle anyone who besmirches the name Hitler.

Marie Madera's choreography follows much of the original dances, including the nicely executed dance of elderly ladies with walkers for the number "Along Came Bialy," and the swastika routine in "Springtime for Hitler," which can be seen from above, thanks to Norris using a camera mounted above the stage, and projecting the image behind the dancers.

Although the blackouts are too lengthy and there are several sound issues, there's a lively can-do spirit to the

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Aerospace Players cast that glosses over some of the weaker spots.

Perhaps given its high degree of difficulty, "The Producers" wasn't the ideal choice. But it's a pleasant change to see the company try to tackle something new.

Jeff Favre is a freelance writer based in North Hollywood.

The Producers

When: 8 p.m. Thursday, Friday and Saturday.

Where: James Armstrong Theatre, Torrance Cultural Arts Center, 3330 Civic Center Drive.

Tickets: \$22, \$18 for seniors, students and children through the Armstrong box office, 310-781-7171.

Information: www.aeaclubs.org/theater.

Our rating: Two and 1/2 stars

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