

Ghent Playhouse, Ghent, New York

RUTHLESS! THE MUSICAL. Book & Lyrics by Joel Paley. Music by Marvin Laird,

Directed by Michael C. Mensching & Michael McDermott

Musical Direction by Joanne Mensching

Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

“It will never be that way again.”

Ruthless!, the 1992 off-Broadway musical parody, has made its way to Ghent, New York in this new production at the Ghent Playhouse. It is a funny show, maybe slightly funnier if you get the jokes based on the source material. Two of the 1950s best movies make up the principal sources: 1950's *“All About Eve”* in which an egotistical stage star is taken in by a slyly usurping fan and *“The Bad Seed,”* a 1956 film based on a 1955 Maxwell Anderson play based on a 1954 novel by William March. The work’s principal character Rhoda Penmark has become Tina Denmark in this musical, a child with a passion for performance who taps her way through life, her ever increasing lust for stardom driving her to do things no one would imagine possible. As in the source films, Tina commits murder to get the leading role in the school show which leads her mother, Judy Denmark, to examine some realities in her own life that she had never even wondered about in the past. Strangely enough this is all good fun, if a bit awkward to enjoy.



Deb Mead as Lita Encore, Rosalynn Annely as Tina, Jeannine Trimboli as Judy;
Photo: John Shea

Tina, well-played by Rosalyn Annely, is obnoxious and almost sickeningly cloying at times which is a perfect parody of Patty McCormack's Rhoda. For the second act, on her return to her mother's home, Tina seemed to have lost not only her childishness, but about forty pounds (and I thought horizontal stripes were fattening). Judy, played wonderfully by Jeannine Trimboli, was the perfect 1950s mother, a Donna Reed in pearls who exhibits no talent at all, who cannot sing her simple songs or even talk to her own mother without sounding simple-minded. When she discovers her true identity she turns (in Act Two) into a major musical comedy star and multiple Tony Award winner named Ginger who is a musical Margo Channing (the Bette Davis character). Trimboli makes both versions of her character believable and enjoyable.



Cathy Lee-Visscher as Miss Thorn, Rosalynn Annely, Annaleigh Butts as Louise
Photo: John Shea

She is not the only character with internal personality conflicts. Sylvia St. Croix, a wily, strong and manipulative publicist/agent turns into someone else when it becomes necessary to alter the outcome of the play. She is played with strength, gusto and rare humor by Nate

Beynon. As Judy's mother, a theater critic named Lita Encore, Deb Mead gives a broad's performance. Her arrogance is her vocal persona and she is just right as this character. Eve (as in "All About . . .") is played by Helen Annely and she is funny indeed. Analeigh Butts is a perfect Louise. You sit in wonder and awe at the thought Louise was cast as Pippi Longstocking.

The role of Miss Thorn, the third grade teacher, is too short. As performed by Cathy Lee-Visscher, this is a knock-out part, funny, musical and funny again. I wish she appeared in Act Two for more than just a moment in the monumental finale. Still, we take what we are offered.

The production has been well staged by Michael McDermott and Michael C. Mensching on a well designed set by Sam Reilly and Cathy Lee-Visscher. Karen Mason and Joanne Maurer have provided costumes that give the characters exactly what they need.. Kelly Sienkiewicz, Mensching and his wife Joanne produced the perfect choreography for the show. Sadly, Joanne Mensching's piano accompaniment was weak and colorless, the only negative for me in this production.

The show is a lot of fun and that is really the best that can be said of it. I think it helps to know the movies that inspired it but you really don't need to if you're willing to just sit back and be entertained by the silliness of the story. Of course, you might recognize Tina as someone in your own family and, if so, try to laugh knowing your own child could not be as overwhelming as this one.

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Nate Beynon as Sylvia , Rosalynn Annely, Jeannine Trimboli as Ginger; Photo: John Shea

Ruthless! the Musical runs at the Ghent Playhouse, 6 Town Hall Place, Ghent, NY through April 30. For information and tickets call (518) 392-6264 or go on line at ghentplayhouse.org.