

Goodspeed Musicals, East Haddam, CT

Gypsy, Book by Arthur Laurents; Music by Jule Styne, Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim.

Based on the memoir by Gypsy Rose Lee.

Directed by Jenn Thompson. Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

“All I need now is the girl.”

Unlike the young dancer/singer named Tulsa in the Arthur Laurents/Stephen Sondheim/Jule Styne musical, “Gypsy,” who is looking for a girl like June Hovick (later, *but not in this show*, the actress June Havoc) I am always on the lookout for a girl like Ethel Merman or Angela Lansbury or Tyne Daly to play her mother Rose. The role is a powerful one, a woman driven to find success on the perilous stages of a flagging Vaudeville that was killed by talking pictures and the depression simultaneously occupying the nation. Rose, a frustrated, embittered woman with three failed marriages, two young daughters and no money to satisfy her dreams, is one of the great and difficult roles in the American Musical Theatre. I have seen it wonderfully played by the three actresses named above and miserably played by many others over the years who strived to make this woman both likeable and sympathetic. There is nothing sympathetic about Rose. She is an unrelenting horror show of a person. That challenge requires a star who does not care about her personal reputation, but only about the role she is playing. In an otherwise fine performance, Judy McLane, in the Goodspeed production, does almost well enough.



Sunny Lauren Hoder, Edward Juvier, Bianca Belle Palana, Emily Jewel Hoder, Cameron Blake Miller; Photo: Diane Sobolewski

McLane is a big-voiced singer with Mermanesque chops who brings clarity and gusto to Rose's many songs. Yes, the show is called "Gypsy" but that title refers more to Rose than to her daughter who grows up to become Minsky's major Burlesque Queen Gypsy Rose Lee. Rose is the true gypsy in this show, willing to travel from place to place, from theater to theater doing one show after another, even if the show she delivers is always much the same thing over again. She dreams of the success that being left by her mother while still a child has eluded her, even in her dealings with her implacable father. By hook or by crook she makes it all happen. She is pushy beyond the boundaries of honest human romantic relationships, even with Herbie, the agent she creates for her purposes, played here with style and with honest passion by Philip Hernandez.

Her young daughters, June (Emily Jewel Hoder, later Laura Sky Herman) and Louise (Cameron Blake Miller, later Talia Suskauer) are long-suffering, eager-beavers who do what they are told to do in spite of their wishes to be what they are denied being - children in a loving family. Rose's dreams are their commands and they obey even when that Rose's wish is impossible. All four "daughters" are terrific (baton twirling, high-kicking, full splits) in this beautiful production directed by the very talented Jenn Thompson, herself the child of two bright performers of the 1960s and 1970s. Here is a director who knows what it's like to be Dainty June.

Complicating this show are three characters who only appear late in the second act, strippers Miss Mazeppa (*Bump it with a trumpet*), Electra (*Do it with a switch*), and Tessie Tura (*If you want to grind it, wait till you've refined it*). They sing and dance one of the great Stephen Sondheim lyrics and totally stop the show in its tracks. Mazeppa is played with great authority by Romelda Teron Benjamin. Tessie is shown off with crude compassion by Valerie Wright. Electra's peculiarities are highlighted by the performance of Victoria Huston-Elem. As always, this trio pulls the show out of its pathos and lights the runway to a spectacular closing tribute to one of the great performing careers in the history of the musical theater, that of Miss Lee.

This production is filled with wonderful performers who illuminate their characters. Kelly Berman is a delightful Agnes, one of the girls who join Rose's supporting players when Louise becomes the *headliner* of the act. Edward Juvier is a delight as Uncle Jocko in the opening scene. Michael Starr is a most attractive Tulsa doing his excellent solo number well choreographed by



Philip Hernandez, Judy McLane;
Photo: Diane Sobolewski

Patricia Wilcox. Geoffrey Wade makes a fine Pop, Rose's father.



Romelda Teron Benjamin;
Photo: Diane Sobolewski

When all else is said Gypsy herself is given the central role in Thompson's visionary production. Talia Suskauer plays the role with honesty, conviction and a wonderful sense of musical perfection. I always marvel at the lengthy transition of professional growth for this character in her big Act Two number and I congratulate her and her dressers for making it work once again. With a perfect Rose this would be the perfect production of "Gypsy." McLane is seven tenths there which is about as close as I've seen in years. The show is still a wonderful experience and very much worth a trip to the historic Connecticut River Valley to see it. It's a great score, a great book, a great musical. You'll have a great time at Goodspeed.

+ 05/11/2023 +

Gypsy plays at The Goodspeed, East Haddam, Connecticut through June 25. For more information and tickets go to goodspeed.org or call the box office at 860-873-8668. You should know that the extra seat cushions ordinarily offered by the theatre are no longer available.

Likewise, the production team has won the day with an inventive and practical set of design elements. The stage within a stage setting for the show has been designed by Alexander Dodge. While I initially thought it would cramp and possibly crimp the show it worked beautifully keeping the show focused. Eduardo Sicangco's costumes were more than suitable, they provided an almost magical sense of time, character and place. The lighting design by Paul Miller was always exactly what each moment needed and even with the oddness of a reflective background for the eleven o'clock number, "Rose's Turn" he managed to keep the show perfect. Jay Hilton's sound design was a bit bright but it gave the famous and classic overture its rightful honors. Wigs, hair and makeup designed by **Jason P. Hayes and J. Jared Janas** made the visuals all work perfectly.



Talia Suskauer as Louise,
the newly dubbed Gypsy Rose Lee;
Photo: Diane Sobolewski

