

Goodspeed Musicals, East Haddam, CT

Summer Stock, Book and additional lyrics by Cheri Steinkellner, based on the 1950 Judy Garland, Gene Kelly MGM movie; Music - traditional.

Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

“I’m glad I met you, you wonderful you.”

When Judy Garland and Gene Kelly combined for the third time since his debut film, “For Me and My Gal,” in 1942 (and their subsequent 1947 film, “The Pirate”), the motion picture they made was “Summer Stock” in 1950. It was not regarded by critics as worthy of either of them. The film featured Gloria DeHaven, Hans Conried, Phil Silvers and Marjorie Main. It was Garland’s final film for MGM. It was also her last movie until “A Star is Born” four years later. In Time Magazine the critic lamented Judy’s “overweight” appearance but lauded her singing and acting along with Kelly’s dancing.



Corbin Bleu (center) and company; Photo: Diane Sobolewski

Now, for Goodspeed Musicals Cheri Steinkellner has devised a new book with new characters and a new focus to create a stage musical based on the old film. Her work works. It works well. The basic plot remains the same, however. Jane Falbury, a Connecticut farmer, gives her younger sister Abigail (now Gloria) a chance to rehearse a musical for New York in her barn which will also house the entire company of players which Jane will also have to feed. Gloria, it turns out, is not the performer she thinks she is and she ultimately loses the leading role to Jane and also the director/leading man, Joe Ross. Jane’s principal suitor Orville Wingate II turns out



Arianna Rosario and Danielle Wade;
Photo: Diane Sobolewski

to be a talented musician who is ostensibly gay and his father, a banker, has been transformed into his mother, a penny-pinching land-hoarder. Using the film's score along with a double-score of American standards dating from 1910 to 1950 ("How Ya Gonna Keep Them Down on the Farm" to "Accentuate the Positive"), the show's new characters do make a difference and the musical is a delight, much better than the original film.

Gloria and Jane are played by Arianna Rosario and Danielle Wade. The two share resemblance and physical possibilities but their characters are so very different that the plot begins to make sense when Gloria quits as the lead and later re-emerges as a show producer. We are shown that she has the same sort of initiative as Jane has about the farm. I think this is a brilliant stroke of invention by Steinkellner. Rosario is very good as Gloria, especially when the two women duet in "Me and My Shadow." Wade has a speech imperfection that turns the letter "s" into a scene of its

own. But as the romantic lead she is devastating. Her slow transformation into the desirable young woman is nothing short of amazing. She acts, she sings, she dances - a triple threat of a talent.

Jane's first-grade sweetheart, Orville Wingate II (Eddie Bracken in the movie) is played by Will Roland who delivers an interesting performance as the overwhelmed son of a tyrannical mother who ultimately shows his mettle and makes a move on the show's composer and arranger, Phil Filmore (Phil Silvers in the movie) played by Gilbert L. Bailey, II. The two men are delicious together, singing and dancing duet as their friendship grows first into a professional arrangement and then turns into who-knows-what. The production allows them to discover that "This is their Lucky Day."

A third romantic relationship comes about when Orville's hideous mother, divinely played by Veanne Cox, reveals a secret passion for a Shakespearean actor who has been blackmailed into taking the lead in Joe Ross's musical extravaganza.



Gilbert L. Bailey, II, Will Roland;
Photo: Diane Sobolewski

When she first sees him, her whole body alters into something unexpected and wonderful. She makes her executive moves on him and he surrenders to her admiration and passion. It is the last great achievement in Montgomery Leach's career (Leach is played with great style and absolutely no warmth (hilariously) by J. Anthony Crane. In spite of what we already know about her, they become the comic relief of this show and their moments together and apart are so well worth watching, particularly their curious rendition of Sophie Tucker's hit song "Red Hot Mamma."



Veanne Cox, J. Anthony Crane;
Photo: Diane Sobolewski

Cox played "Flora, the Red Menace" in its revised and rewritten format in 1987 at the Vineyard Theatre and blew away memories of Liza Minnelli in the original. Here she creates a totally new character and nearly steals the show away from the principals, but that cannot be done when it comes to the male star of the musical, Corbin Bleu.

Bleu is the recipient of the Chita Rivera Award for Outstanding Male Dancer in a Broadway Show and it is plain to see how well-deserved an award it is for him. Almost constantly on the move in this show he dances with an outrageous amount of energy and verve that almost put Gene Kelly to shame. His tap-dancing and his modern variations are spectacular and if his singing is sometimes a hair unenthusiastic it really doesn't matter

because he comes back again and again to make those rare moments ring in your ears. He and Danielle Wade ultimately make a perfect couple as Joe and Jane. They share the same enthusiasm for what they are doing at Goodspeed and though neither of them has played a leading role here before it is my forthright hope that they will both be back in the near future. In this show they are great to watch and listen to as they sing standards like "I'm Always Chasing Rainbows" and "You Wonderful You."

Stephen Lee Anderson as Pop Falbury, another new character not in the movie has his own stand-out, pop hit moment in the second act which came as a surprise. He sings the song "June Night" with the chorus around him and literally stops the show. Taking the "Ethel Merman Moment"



Corbin Bleu, Danielle Wade; Photo: Diane Sobolewski

he sings, makes a move or two and then allows the chorus to take the stage and dance their hearts out before he returns to complete the number. It's a wonder to see someone who is not a triple-threat in this show making such a significant contribution.



Stephen Lee Anderson (center) and chorus; Photo: Diane Sobolewski

The show's director/choreographer Donna Feore has done a beautiful job pulling this new version of a classic into being. Her company, under her direction, is almost never still and is definitely the most energetic performers on stage right now anywhere. There seems to be nothing that she could ask of them that they wouldn't do for her. A well-loved Canadian with a long history of American Musicals, she is certainly a welcome addition to the Goodspeed roster.

She has superb assistance by a talented group of designers who have expanded the limited space of the Goodspeed stage with their visual magic. Wilson Chin's set designs are wonderfully classic Broadway and Tina McCartney's costume designs are ideal for these characters. It is the lighting design by Jeff Croiter that really makes the show work so seamlessly.

This show is too much fun to miss. I don't know if it will show up somewhere else, but if it does it may not have these same wonderful people in it. Seeing Corbin Bleu is a theatrical necessity. Watching Gilbert L. Bailey II is so very worthwhile. Everyone in this company is worthy of worship and adoration and I heartily recommend such action.

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Summer Stock plays at Goodspeed Musicals in East Haddam, CT through August 27. For information and tickets go to www.goodspeed.org or call 860.873.8668.

