

Mac-Haydn Theatre, Chatham, NY

*The Fantasticks*, book and lyrics by Tom Jones. Music by Harvey Schmidt.

Directed by John Saunders.

Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

**“They did it ‘cause you said ‘no’.”**

It’s the age-old problem of parenting: how to get your children to do what you actually want them to do, that informs the plot of “The Fantasticks.” Huckabee and Bellamy, next-door neighbors want their children to fall in love and marry, unifying the families and keeping their abutting properties intact as a single place. This musical tale of greed has been a constant hit off-Broadway since 1960. It has spawned a Broadway edition, a movie, a TV version and at least 11,000 regional, summer and amateur theater productions in these sixty-four years. Often cited by people as their favorite shows it’s simple message about love, in its infinite variety, boredom with life, and the infinite possibilities of living well have captured humanity’s collective imagination for over half a century.



Bella Babcock, Tristan Caldwell;  
Photo: Ann Kielbasa



Conor Fallon; Photo: Ann Kielbasa

Very few musicals or plays have come close to the success of “The Fantasticks.” I have seen at least fifteen productions of the show, including its 1960 original with Jerry Orbach, Rita Gardner, Kenneth Nelson and Tom Jones (as Thomas Bruce). When Orbach left the show, this relatively unknown off-Broadway star’s withdrawal gave people the idea that the show would soon close which was not the case. It went on and on for a record run of 17,162 performances. Two other off-Broadway shows of the period had long runs, Kurt Weill’s “The Three-Penny Opera” and Jerome Kern’s “Leave It to Jane.” This is the second Mac-Haydn production in eleven years. Though its run is a short one, closing out the theater’s season, it should be a good one.

Orbach's role as the Narrator and the bandit El Gallo, is played here by Tristan Caldwell, a handsome man with an equally handsome voice. His rendition of the opening song, "Try to Remember" is classic, both vocally and dramatically. He weaves a spell around the young lovers that is palpable. He moves romantically as well, which gives the abduction (or "rape") ballet a certain quality of sincerity clouded with comedy. This double-duty task gives the show a clarity it hasn't always had, in my experience.



Tristan Caldwell as El Gallo; Photo: Ann Kielbasa

Conor Fallon plays Matt with sincerity and a self-assured sensibility that is almost perfect for the boy in the story. His youth and inexperience shines through. His singing is broad and self-assured and just right for his songs, particularly at the end of the show when he delivers "They Were You," to a very willing Luisa (the girl). Bella Babcock's Luisa is just as good, especially when she dances or moves about the stage in a dramatic fashion. She is a joy to watch, although for my ears, her voice is a bit too high and shrill for her songs. She is almost too accomplished to truly deliver a young girl's whimsy in songs such as "Much More" and "Soon It's Gonna Rain."



Mikel Hunter; Photo: Ann Kielbasa

This production's secondary characters are so well played that almost any flaws are easily forgivable. Mikel Hunter as Mortimer, the Man Who Dies, is hilarious. Kevin Weldon as Henry, the old actor, is a non-stop source of humor, of laughter and compassion. Together they pull off some of the show's funniest business as directed by John Saunders who actually prolongs this slightly reduced edition of the show giving it back some of its length and certainly emphasizing it's fascinating characters. Weldon and Hunter are a perfect team. There are two Mutes who manage the stage settings, provide props and perform choreographed moments, beautifully produced by Bella DePaola; they are Emily Allen and Anthony Michael Velez.



Gabe Belyeu, Jeffrey Konowitch; Photo: Ann Kielbasa

This production's two show-stoppers, naturally, are the fathers, Huckabee and Bellamy, played to the teeth by Gabe Belyeu and Jeffrey Konowitch. Whether working in their gardens, or monitoring their children, or confirming their conniving the two men are irrepressible. Every word, every movement, memorable and effective, moves the play within the show along. Their songs are delightful, and they dance as gracefully as Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. "Plant a Radish" was a particular favorite of mine.

The other two "stars" of the Mac's presentation are the on-stage orchestra, Kathryn Sloat on the Harp and Eric Shorey on the Piano. They are fabulous\ although the Harp could be better miked.

The physical production is lovely. Scenic Designer Andrea Gmoser and Lighting Designer Andrew Gmoser make a perfect team. Costume Designer Daniel Hewson has given the characters perfect looks for their time on stage, helping to define the elements that make them such universal people.

I thought I never needed to see another production of "The Fantasticks" but I am so glad I saw this one. It will be a classic in my memory and it can do the same for you. It's a short run, so plan to see it very soon.

+ 09/07/2024 +

**The Fantasticks** runs at the Mac-Haydn Theatre, 1925 State Route 203, Chazthan, New York, through September 15. For information and tickerts go to [machaydntheatre.org](http://machaydntheatre.org) or call 518-392-9292.