

Sensitivity heightens 'Carnival'

By HELEN ZUCKER

The Birmingham Village Players have hit a high note with a stunning production of Bob Merrill and Michael Stewart's musical "Carnival."

Director Duncan Jones and Musical Director Priscilla Benton thoroughly understand both the book and the music, and the effects of their sensitive interpretation is obvious everywhere.

Al Ratcliffe is excellent as R. F. Schlegel, the wheedling, slippery, hard-working, carnival owner who must keep the show on the road. Ratcliffe screws up his Jason Roberts face, and slinking about like the fox in Pinocchio, shouts at his rambunctious assortment of lion tamers, snake charmers, aerialists, clowns, and temperamental artists.

"Children, make me proud of You! Thrill me! Oh, why do I do this? I'm so weary! Who needs this?" Ratcliffe gives us a Schlegel who is every bit as temperamental as the people who work for him. He's simply canner. His energy is wonderful.

THE GIFTED Don Jackson plays Jacquot, the lad who has spent his life in carnivals, the dedicated, good-hearted artist who truly loves his craft and whose idea of heaven is playing the Cirque de Paris. Jackson also plays the favorite character, Horrible Henry, a green walrus puppet, who has the best lines in the show, and Renardo, the fox.

Renardo is another puppet in a foursome of "play within a play" in "Carnival." Jackson has range, and his animated voice shrieking with joy over having his "tootsie" (Henry's Toots) touched, or dropping into the doll-drum as he gives us a rundown of his favorite operas, "Barbara of Seville" and "The Madame in Butterfly," is sheer delight.

I've never been able to stand puppet shows, yet I found the puppet routines in "Carnival" enthralling. The lines have genuine charm, and the actors make the most of them. But Match plays Carrot Top and Madame, the other two puppets. He has the best voice in the cast and does a fine job with a difficult role. Match plays Paul Barthelot, the bitter, ex-dancer who has lost the love of one leg and he has become a puppeteer.

Match gives us a Barthelot who is angry at the world, who feels he is at the bottom of the pit, who cannot believe in his new career or give himself wholly to his work. Though he is good at it — until Lili, the magical girl from the far-away town of Mira, shows up and reaches through his pain.

MATYCI TURNIS in the strongest performance of the evening, and his rich voice is especially effective in the songs "I've Got to Find a Reason," "Her Face" and the duet "I Hate Him."

Del Moore as Lili is not quite the equal of Matych. Ms. Moore is a marvelous singer; she hits high C's with ease. But the role of Lili, the "good girl" mixed up with crazy, cynical carry people — the dewdrop among exotic jungle flowers — is a hard bit to pull off.

I think this is a fault of the script, not of Ms. Moore — she gives her all. But the script calls for a starry-eyed nitwit who has all of five minutes at the finale to grow up.

Lili's lines, until the very end, are all exclamations of childish wonder. She works in the puppet act without knowing that Barthelot is the man behind the puppets. She loves Marco, the masquer, until the fog of her innocence lifts during the last song.

Ms. Moore is charming despite these odds. And her rendition of the famous song, "Love Makes the World Go Round," is lovely.

BEN BENSON is suave and funny as Marco, the eccentric, girl-chasing Magician. He plucks paper carnations from thin air and takes such delight in his handsome self, his success with women, his complete self-absorption, that

we laugh at his villainous behavior.

"Paul, you do show up at the oddest times," Marco says, pointing, as the enraged Barthelot tries to get him away from Lili.

Betsy Todd is more than a match for Benson. She plays the "Incomparable Rosalie," Marco's partner and life-long mistress with great pizzazz. Ms. Todd and Benson are ferociously funny in "Humming," a put-down of the musical "The Sound of Music."

Don Schore, Don Brown, Jim Masters and Jack Cortez (on leave from the Will-O-Way Repertory Theatre) are the most rousing Roustabouts I have ever seen. Alice Armstrong, Lindsay Balmer, Karen Bayekian and Dottie Mitchell are hilarious as the Blue Bird Girls. The eight performers fill in as dancers, cotton candy salesman, party movers, and add greatly to the feeling of carnival merriment the script calls for.

Chuck Peace, wheels across the stage on a unicycle, dressed in sequins, and Dike Dwelley, dressed in monstrous muscles and a tiger skin, doesn't need to say anything to get a laugh.

BILL HAYCOCK and Ann Sayla as Floppy, mopey clowns tumble about from thin air and takes such delight in his handsome self, his success with women, his complete self-absorption, that

Review

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