

'Daring' 1960s live again in 'Promises, Promises'

Performances of the Birmingham Theatre production of "Promises, Promises" continue through Sunday, Jan. 31. For ticket information call the box office at 644-3533.

By Cathie Breidenbach
special writer

The Birmingham Theatre cheerfully revives miniskirts and '60s-style romantic dalliance in "Promises, Promises," the musical favorite based on the movie "The Apartment."

"Promises" recreates the year 1968 when women looked like overgrown little girls in skirts that showed off their legs — good and bad legs in the bargain. At the Birmingham, "Promises" comes off as a lively bit of musical nostalgia — certainly a good evening's entertainment, if not the year's most remarkable show.

With book by Neil Simon, music by Burt Bacharach and lyrics by Hal David, the luminaries of Broadway conspired for success on "Promises." It was the first time the team of Bacharach and David worked together. Songs "What Do You Get When You Fall in Love" and "Promises, Promises" bring back memories.

In 1968 when the poignant humor in "The Apartment" (starring Jack Lemmon and Shirley MacLaine) won the Academy Award, the tale seemed more relevant than it does now after more than two decades of sexual revolution and women's lib. Then again some things never change. Rumor has it that corporate wolves still prey on sweet secretaries.

Barry Williams of "Brady Bunch" fame stars as Chuck Baxter, the ambitious junior executive who lends the key to his bachelor apartment to win points and promotions from philandering superiors who need a place to daily. With his Joe Namath-blue eyes and handsome look, Williams makes it hard to believe his complaints that he bats zero with women.

He's almost too good looking to play a comic leading man — until he puts on a hat in Act II that makes his ears stick out. That one wonderful flaw enhances his comic credibility. Instantly he becomes funnier and more lovable, especially in the scene at a local bar when he gets playfully potted because his apartment is "in use" and he can't go home.

Alison Bevans is delightful as the bookers lady in the bar wearing a ludicrous coat made of owl feathers and on the lookout for "companionship."

Sarah Combs plays the object of Chuck Baxter's affections, dressed as a confection in innocent pink. She sings wonderfully and recreates the magic of songs in the inimitable Dionne Warwick style that made them famous. Her perpetually pink costumes are a bit much, however.



Barry Williams is Chuck Baxter and Sarah Combs is Fran Kubelik in the musical hit "Promises, Promises" at the Birmingham Theatre.

review

She wears short dresses with ruffles, and she ties cute bows in her Tricia Nixon blond locks. It's cloying even for the '60s to believe a Manhattan working girl would dress like Goldilocks. She can't help the miniskirt. It was the uniform of the time, but pink ruffles overdo the fairy tale innocence on a woman who already sounds like Little Red Riding Hood when she believes the promises fed her by a lecherous wolf in corporate gray.

Mark Jacoby plays the wolf with appropriate callousness. He's brittle and cold just as an inveterate con and ought to be. Four middle-aged executives with roving eyes, played by Tim Ewing, James Hindman, Robert Lydard and Bill Tatum, caper around the stage to hilarious effect.

The hands-down prize for best character actor goes to Bernard Granville who plays Dr. Dreyfus, Chuck's next-door neighbor. With sounds of champagne corks popping, bed springs bouncing and amorous noises coming from Chuck's apartment, Dr. Dreyfus and his never-seen wife, Mildred, get quite an earful, and they blame all the activity on Chuck. The good doctor's pithy comments on the goings-on provide the best laugh lines in the play.

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Cathie Breidenbach

All eyes on Cynthia Darlow as Rita, who becomes educated

Performances of the Meadow Brook Theatre production of "Educating Rita" continue through Sunday, Jan. 24, on the Oakland University campus in Rochester Hills. For ticket information call the box office at 377-3300.

Cynthia Darlow is utterly captivating in Willy Russell's two-person play "Educating Rita."

With effervescent energy and unparalleled mastery of the nuances of character and comedy, she ricochets around the Meadow Brook stage. All eyes follow her every move as she brings to life the vibrant Rita, a four-star character — forthright, uninhibited and full of boundless life. Rita's a 25-year-old English hairdresser who yearns for something more than shallow talk at the shop, where she works, and nights out at the pub.

To find out what she's missing, Rita signs up to take an extension course in literature and is assigned a rumpled, alcoholic professor named Frank as her tutor.

Local actor/director David Regal who is artistic director of the Theatre Company at the University of Detroit, aptly plays Frank as a disillusioned teacher and burned-out poet. Frank spends his days putting in his office slapping Scotch from a coffee cup and shuffling papers as he waits for the pubs to open. Then

Rita catapults through his office door.

HIS OFFICE is a grand, high-ceilinged room created on the Meadow Brook stage by set designer Peter Hicks. It's reminiscent of the huge, old libraries of English manor houses. If it seems too spacious for a minor professor at a lesser English university, it's nevertheless a splendid room, cozy with the warmth of nonchalant scruffiness and of books in scholarly disarray on every available surface.

The story takes place in the North of England. Rita's working class, north country accent is thick as it comes. Rita and Frank engage in a few rounds of repartee before American ears tune in to her lingo. After that it's sheer pleasure to hear Darlow's dialect peppered with local idioms and not-so-local expletives. Accents can be the downfall of even fine actresses, but the American-born Darlow's accent is so good she could likely fool locals hanging out at a pub in Beale country.

Regal as Frank is a low-keyed foil to Rita, and he shows well the evolution of Frank's feelings. At first the

professor is irritated at the hopelessness of the assignment to educate a dizzy woman whose idea of quality literature runs to Harold Robbins. He moves to bemused delight at the rest of her personality and comes to realize that beneath the explosive frazzled auburn hair, Rita has a quick, inquiring mind and an intense determination to carve a better life for herself.

By the play's end, Rita has Frank in the palm of her hand — which is not to imply that the play is a conventional romance, despite a few inevitable sparks between the electrifying Rita and the disheveled, charming Frank.

Willy Russell's play, best known to American audiences as a movie starring Michael Caine and Julie Walters, is a fine, meaty piece of theater full of laughter and meaning. The play doesn't succumb to sentimentality, and despite the fact that it's about the broad ramifications of art and class, it never condescends.

DIRECTOR TERENCE Kilburn wisely lets the inimitable Darlow run with her characterization in this superb Meadow Brook production.

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