

THEATER

Enjoy night at the opera with 'Tenor'

Stagecrafters presents "Lend Me A Tenor" continues through Sunday, April 5, Baldwin Theatre, 415 S. Lafayette, Royal Oak. Tickets \$10-\$12, call (248) 641-6430. Performances 8 p.m. Thursday, March 26; Friday & Saturday through April 4; 7 p.m. Sunday, March 29; 2 p.m. Sunday, April 5.

By JON KATZ
SPECIAL WRITER

Let's begin with a point of fact and a point of observation.

Point of fact: Ken Ludwig's "Lend Me A Tenor" is neither a musical nor an opera; at least, no more than is the Marx Brothers' "A Night at the Opera," and almost as fun.

Point of observation: it's awfully hard to put on a bad production of "Lend Me A Tenor." Ludwig has stocked his script with so many assorted gags — puns, spit takes, physical shtick, mistaken identities — that only someone who's found a way to lose money in the stock market lately could walk away an unhappy camper.

Stagecrafters' version certainly works for and gets its laughs. Set in 1934 Cleveland, "Tenor" is a screwball comedy about a hapless assistant for the city's opera company, hopelessly in love with the boss' daughter, who gets his big chance to sing "Othello" when the Pavarotti-type star becomes indisposed.

Max the gopher (Will Rodgers) is a hefty mix of Seinfeld's Newman, Flounder from "Animal House" and Matt Foley, the motivational speaker created by the late Chris Farley. He's put in charge of baby-sitting Tito (Il Stupendo) Morelli (Steven Tokarski), when the famous singer comes into town for the big one-nighter. Saunders, the company's manic director (Gregg Watkins), so nervous that he eats the wax fruit, tells Max to "do whatever you have to" to make sure that Tito gets his rest and doesn't miss the performance.

Tito gets his rest, all right, and soon there's one-too-many Moors in full Venetian costume and burnt cork make-up running around Cleveland, and the two-room hotel suite.

Rodgers makes a first-class nebbish. Encouraged by Tito to keep saying "I'm a Max — I sing GOOD," he carries off the deception, but finds that wearing someone else's mask will only get you so far, and it's not far enough.

Tokarski's Il Stupendo starts off more like the Pillsbury Doughboy, but grows on you with his strong voice and nice timing in the frenetic second act.

When Watkins as Saunders is speaking, you may want to close your eyes and imagine the smooth, mellow-toned actor in a radio drama. Unfortunately, his

character is supposed to be this close to over-the-edge, and he's not nearly there. Keep the pitch where it is, but speed it up several notches and give us some physical sense that the guy's already got a bad book at the Home for Crazy Impresarios.

Debby Dworkin is a cutesy Maggie, Saunders' daughter and the object of Max's affection. She's got a girlish crush on Tito, with whom she'd like to have that one premarital fling, and carries off the moment when she believes that her fling has been successfully flung.

Nancy DeRita makes the most of her two scenes as Tito's jealously suffering wife Maria, the Italian spitfire. Nevertheless, there's still room to grow within the part; Maria should make El

Nino seem like a gentle breeze by comparison.

Rob Chrenko adds to the fun as a singing bellhop. Deborah Landis-Sigler does the Margaret Dumont opera matron to a tee. And Sandra Marselle, as the company's aggressive soprano, has the show's best line: "Never trust a man in tights."

Director Mel Janney wisely sticks to what works — nonstop farce — and the crew would be advised to keep all six doors on the handsome set well-oiled.

A few traditional highlights were omitted including the "leaning on the wall" bit and the pre-curtain call, mile-a-minute reprise of the entire show.

But it's a good "Tenor," after all, and you'll enjoy a night at this opera.



DAVID RIZZO

Comedy: Debby Dworkin (clockwise from left) as Maggie, Will Rodgers as Max, and Steve Tokarski as Tito in the Stagecrafters production of "Lend Me A Tenor."

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