

# 'Moon Over Buffalo' shines at Mountain Community Theatre



*By* By Joanne Englehardt

Santa Cruz Sentinel

POSTED: 04/03/13, 12:01 AM PDT

0 COMMENTS

Playwright Ken Ludwig writes his Broadway shows in a distinctive style, one that usually includes plenty of mistaken-identity hijinks and sets with lots of doors. A Tony Award nominee for both "Lend Me a Tenor" and for writing the book for "Crazy for You," Ludwig created another, lesser-known play that nevertheless is both equally improbable and hilarious.

That would be "Moon Over Buffalo," which Mountain Community Theater is currently presenting through April 14 at the Park Hall in Ben Lomond.

Director Peter Gelblum was wise to encourage his zany collection of cast members to throw caution (not to mention their clothing, their wigs and their dignity) to the wind for this production. The result is a spirited show that is nothing if not lively, fun and sometimes even sweet.

Credit the surprisingly elastic, Gumby-like Michael Stark as fading theater icon George Hay, who with his wife Charlotte (the vivacious, wonderfully expressive Tara McMilin) are now reduced to playing in third-rate theaters in towns like Scranton and Buffalo (hence this play's name). The year is 1953, but the themes of womanizing, drunkenness and double entendres are as common then as now. In "Moon," however, all of these weighty topics are treated in a breathless, slapstick, farcical way.

But never mind. Once the plot actually gets going, the audience has little time to think about anything other than how much they're laughing at the bounty of funny lines. One of the best: George says "Theater is all we've got. Without it, we'd all be Republicans."

The entire play takes place in one day, primarily backstage at the Erlanger Theater in Buffalo. George and Charlotte are performing in repertory in both "Cyrano de Bergerac" and "Private Lives." But in recent weeks they haven't been able to make their payroll and blame the advent of television for the demise of live theater. On top of this, George learns that his recent romp with the play's ingénue Eileen (an unfortunately miscast Ashley Sue Moore) has resulted in an unplanned pregnancy.

Into this melee comes the news that Hollywood director Frank Capra is flying in that very day to attend the matinee to decide whether George will replace Ronald Colman (who fell down a flight of stairs and broke both of his legs) in Capra's latest film, "The Twilight of the Scarlet Pimpernel."

Add to this mix:

Rosalind, George and Charlotte's only child, (played with wit, elegance and youthful appeal by Jessica Alder). Roz, who quit show business to lead a "normal" life (she now has a job in advertising), comes to visit her parents to introduce them to her new fiancé, Howard (a boyish, nerdy Grant Patrizio).

Ethel, Charlotte's extremely hard-of-hearing mother (a deadpan, overly subdued Rita Wadsworth) who speaks of her son-in-law with obvious disdain: "The man is a walking ham." While Ms. Wadsworth's physical mannerisms are flawless, on opening night she tended to speak too softly so it was difficult to hear some of her lines.

Nat Robinson as Roz's former fiance, Paul, and Scott Whisler as the Hays' lawyer who has always loved Charlotte, complete the cast.

J. Duffy's inventive set offers up a comfortable green room (despite the fact that the walls are painted blue) with the requisite number of doors, stairs and cozy furniture. It's a nice touch to have many framed photos and Billboard covers of the Hays spanning their theatrical career. For the most part, costumes look lifted authentically from the 1950s, and Stark's Cyrano outfit is suitably dashing — fake nose and all. Erik Gandolfi's fight choreography adds a dollop of flair.

Mention must be made of the daring drunk scene Stark handles with remarkable ease and realism in Act 2. As he meanders upstage and down, bottle of whiskey in one hand, Stark frequently balances on one leg, teetering at the very edge of the raised stage. That he succeeded in convincing the audience he is, indeed, very intoxicated is a testament to his acting skill.

Shakespeare or Stoppard this is not. But for a laugh-filled entertaining evening of theater, MCT's take on "Moon Over Buffalo" agreeably fills the bill. It's likely no one ever has this much fun in the real Buffalo.

{ through april 14 Mountain Community Theater, Park Hall, 9400 Mill St., Ben Lomond. \$20 general; \$17 students and seniors; \$20 2-for-1 price for April 11 performance. [www.mctshows.org](http://www.mctshows.org) or [www.brownpapertickets.com](http://www.brownpapertickets.com) }