



ASGT Set To Open 50th Season With Lineup Celebrating Love, Life And Laughter

Dylan Roche | May 4, 2016

Stars shine bright at Annapolis Summer Garden Theatre in more ways than one. For 50 years, the community theatre company in the heart of downtown Annapolis has been featuring the talents of local singers, dancers, actors, directors, musicians and other artists in the open air under the night sky, and for many loyal audience members, the summer isn't

complete until they've enjoyed an evening at ASGT.

Self-billed as “fun, casual and never stuffy,” Annapolis Summer Garden combines the best parts of experiencing live theater with visiting downtown Annapolis. And to make the most of its 50th year, the company has planned an upbeat lineup of shows — “The Wedding Singer,” “Rent” and “The Producers,” as well as its own anniversary show, “50 Years Under The Stars: A Musical Retrospective.”

Already ASGT as an organization has held an open house to welcome a fresh group of volunteers, many of whom helped spruce up the theater for the new season; auditions have been held, production meetings have been conducted, and rehearsals are underway.

Let's take a look at each one of the shows in store for audiences.

The Wedding Singer

May 26-June 18

The year is 1985. The hair is big, collars are up, and greed is good. Rock-star wannabe Robbie Hart is New Jersey's favorite wedding singer and the life of the party — until his own fiancée leaves him at the altar. Things look up when he meets Julia, a winsome waitress, but she's about to marry a Wall Street shark, Glen Gulia. Unless Robbie can change his tune and pull off the performance of the decade, the girl of his dreams will be gone forever.

“This is such a fun show,” director Mark Briner said of the over-the-top '80s tribute. “I told my cast on the first rehearsal — and most of them are in their 20s — that the '80s was the last fun decade for everything. It was the last really fun decade for music, for clothes. And we try to recreate all that with this show.”

As opening night approaches on May 26, elements of “Wedding Singer” are coming together, and Briner couldn't be more delighted by all the '80s awesomeness in the production. The costumes and wigs — which Briner described as hilarious — have transformed the cast of modern-day Annapolitans into 1980s New Jerseyians. The music — which pays homage to Madonna, Michael Jackson, Joan Jett, Van Halen, Cyndi Lauper and many others — is enlivened by period-appropriate dance moves taught by choreographer Becca Vourvoulas. “It's a really cool salute to all the fun and over-the-top excess that made the '80s a wonderful decade,” Briner said.

He also gave credit to his cast for working tremendously hard while never losing their sense of fun along the way. Austin Jacobs plays Robbie Hart alongside Hayley Briner and Layne Seaman splitting the role of Julia Sullivan. They're supported by Fred Fletcher-Jackson as Sammy, Robbie Dinsmore as George, Ashley Gladden as Holly, Jeff Hawkins as Glen, Hannah Thornhill as Linda, Phyllis Everette as Rosie and a large ensemble.

“It's really been an amazing process for them and for me,” Briner said. “We're all just having a great time getting together and bringing this show to life.”

Although some audience members might be familiar with “The Wedding Singer” from the movie starring Adam Sandler and Drew Barrymore, Briner believes the stage adaptation improves upon its material, developing many of the characters more thoroughly and adding irresistibly upbeat ‘80s-style songs.

Notably, the story’s protagonist is much more lifelike. “There’s a very strong character there who is fun, funny, heartwarming and engaging,” Briner said, adding that Jacobs makes a great fit for the role. “The audiences will just take to him. He’s so charismatic onstage.”

Whether theatergoers were around for the ‘80s and are coming to relive the decade, or whether they are too young to have enjoyed the era of big hair and parachute pants, they are sure to have a great time. “I want them to leave with a smile on their face,” Briner said. “I want them to feel as we all felt in the ‘80s — to enjoy good music for good music’s sake, and comedy for comedy’s sake, and appreciate the life and the color and the fun that we put together to reinvent the ‘80s for them.”

Rent

June 30-July 23

A rock opera based loosely on Puccini’s “La Boheme” and set in the East Village of New York City, “Rent” follows a year in the life of a group of impoverished young artists. Struggling to survive and create under the shadows of addiction and HIV/AIDS, these young bohemians negotiate their dreams and conflicts through rocking songs and a gripping story.

To bring a fresh vision to “Rent,” director Andy Scott said he has sought to find the space where rock concert and opera meet and, once he finds that clash, to amplify it. “One of the best parts of preparing for this show has been being fully immersed in the music,” he said. “The variety and the attitude and the cathartic elements of music give you so much to work with from the very beginning.”

And because there are so many elements to the story of “Rent” — plots, subplots, character arcs, romances and so forth — he said that a challenge will be keeping it all as one united story, but it’s a challenge he is excited to meet.

Among the principal cast members are Tim German as Mark, David J. Colton as Roger, Athena Blackwood as Mimi, Loghan Bazan as Maureen, Andrea Greenwald as Joanne, Christian Gonzalez as Collins, Nicholas Edward Carter as Angel and Matthew Walter as Benny.

In his first rehearsal, Scott jumped right into connecting the cast with the emotional core of the story. “Everyone who came in was familiar with it, so we just talked about the issues in the show,” he said. “It was a good time to enter the process with insight and sensitivity and a sense of vitality.”

Scott also hopes that his visual design will help connect the audiences to the characters. “The show is intended to be performed without an illusion; it’s not meant to be the sort of show where you as an audience member suspend disbelief,” Scott described. “It’s meant to be

humanized and raw and transparent in certain ways, so landing an aesthetic for that is harder than you would think.”

But Scott’s design team still plans to use visual clarity to tell the story without the pretense of theatrical spectacle. For example, he shared, the costume design will emphasize colors to represent ideas — AIDS, drug addiction and so forth — thus helping the audience make associations among the characters.

Furthermore, Scott wants to explore the ideas of inclusiveness by having four performers interpreting the show in American Sign Language. “It will not only keep the show inclusive to people of all walks of life,” he said, “but it will also enhance the language and give people the opportunity to see more than one form of expression at once.”

By experiencing “Rent,” Scott hopes that audiences will feel the way he feels every time he listens to the music. “I want to be a better person; I want to wake up the next day and embrace life more fully,” he said. “I think specifically in this time, we as a human race could work on empathy a bit more. We’re losing our sense of empathy. It’s an election year; lots of changes are happening. And I guess it would be great if at least one person left knowing that they don’t know someone else’s story, someone they pass in the street, they don’t know their story, so we shouldn’t judge them. I also hope people laugh and cry and that they love it in general.”

The Producers

August 4-September 4

The plan is simple: A down-on-his-luck Broadway producer and his mild-mannered accountant scheme to produce the most notorious flop in Broadway history, thereby bilking their backers out of millions of dollars. But one thing goes awry — their show (the outrageously offensive “Springtime for Hitler”) is a smash hit!

“It’s so Mel Brooks,” said director Jerry Vess of the show’s humor. “It’s just so wrong in a way. It’s a throwback to those old mad-hat comedies, and it’s really well made.”

A longtime fan of “The Producers,” Vess is eager to see his actors find their interpretation of the characters that some of them are all too familiar with from the classic film. “What we want to do is be true to the spirit of what it is,” he said. “I don’t want them imitating, don’t want them to be doing a carbon copy of what they’ve seen, but the writing is in such a way that it takes you that way.”

Still, Vess has given his cast the creative liberty to make the show their own. As he will tell a cast member in rehearsal, “He’s a crazy German, but it needs to be your crazy German.”

In ASGT’s production, Barney Rinaldi leads as Max Bialystock alongside Nathan Bowen as Leo Bloom. Other members of the cast are Josh Mooney as Franz, Peter Thompson as Roger, Kevin James Logan as Carmen Ghia and Erica Miller as Ulla.

Creating his cast was a big part of fulfilling Vess’ vision for the zany characters who populate

the story. “Through the audition process, you see who’s leaning where,” he said. “You see who’s getting it. They get this. Their natural instinct is already taking them down that path.”

One of the big challenges ahead for “Producers” is the performing space — with no fly system and limited room offstage, ASGT won’t be able to lend itself to the visually elaborate play-within-a-play “Springtime for Hitler,” but Vess said his design team has been creative. “I think we’ve solved that problem, but I won’t tell you how we solved it,” he said. “I think when people see it, they’ll think, ‘Oh, how’d that happen?’”

Intriguing indeed. Audiences who see “The Producers” are sure to leave with plenty to talk about: an edgy storyline, endless twisted jokes and creative spectacle. “I want them to come away and feel that they were just on a roller coaster, all up and down and which-a-way,” Vess said.

As a special bonus to this year’s lineup, ASGT will also present an original revue, “50 Years Under the Stars: A Musical Retrospective,” conceived and directed by Julie Ann Hawk, set for September 9-18.

Full details on ASGT’s upcoming season — including show dates and times, ticket information, and parental advisories regarding content — are available at www.summergarden.com.

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