



'Murder for Two' sparkles at Williamston

REVIEW July 26, 2017 Lynne Frederickson

WILLIAMSTON, Mich.—Wrapping up the 11th season at Williamston Theater is the whimsical musical whodunit, *Murder for Two*.

I must confess I had low expectations for this production, entirely due to the unfortunately predictable title; to me *Murder for Two* suggested yet another tired *Mousetrap* wannabe. But how wrong I was!

A fast-paced homage to old-fashioned murder mysteries, *Murder for Two* is chock full of witty lyrics, loony characters, and brilliant piano playing. Clocking in at 90 minutes with no intermission, this deliciously off-kilter musical comedy crackled with energy, delivering laugh after laugh.

This Williamston production is directed by Rob Roznowski, with intelligent lyrics by Kellen Blair and a zingy score by Joe Kinosian, this two-hander with a cast of thousands (ok, 13) is deftly played by Mark Schenfisch and Andrea Wollenberg.

Murdered at his own surprise party, crime novelist Arthur Whitney has left behind a breadcrumb trail of ridiculously literal book titles and a living room full of friends and relations with plausible motives for murder. Arriving on the scene an hour in advance of his boss, aspiring young detective wannabe Marcus Moscovicz (Schenfisch) seizes the opportunity to solve the crime and advance his career. Although he receives no assistance from his partner (aptly portrayed by a shrub), and Whitney's daft widow Daphne (Wollenberg) is worse than no help, Whitney's wide-eyed young niece Steph Whitney (also Wollenberg) is fortunately in attendance, and her grad school criminology thesis just happens to be *How to Assist in the Solving of a Small-Town Murder*.

In addition to playing Daphne and Steph, Wollenberg plays all the other suspects opposite Moscovicz, and her lightning-swift transitions from one campy stock character to the next is a master class in physical comedy. Though each switch is signaled by a single prop (cleverly designed by Michelle Raymond), it is Wollenberg's delightfully plastic face, voice, and posture that truly creates each character, sometimes for only a few seconds at a time. From an unbalanced Freudian psychiatrist with patient confidentiality issues to a self-incriminating femme fatale Russian ballerina, to a 12-member choir of hardscrabble urchins (with only three surviving members), each shift is brilliantly executed; at times it is easy to forget that there are never more than two actors actually on

stage. And sometimes the transitions themselves become the joke, as in the case of the constantly bickering neighbor couple straight out of Damon Runyon.

And Schinifisch, as the plucky man-ingénue (mangénue?) Marcus, is the perfect foil for Wollenberg's zany personas. With a faith in protocol only hampered by a weakness for dangerous women, Marcus approaches the case with youthful aplomb, channeling Neil Patrick Harris with his clear tenor and comedic earnestness.

And oh the piano! Both accomplished pianists, Wollenberg and Scheinifisch trade off energetic piano duty to provide the show's accompaniment. But this device is also used to great comic effect – some of the funniest moments are when they sit at the keyboard together, either in the throes of carnal ecstasy or dashing off a post-curtain call slapstick duet.

Director Rob Roznowski takes full advantage of Bartley H. Bauer's inventive and polished set—a pile of books representing Whitney's dead body is good for several irreverent gags, absurdly askew bookshelves seem practically animated as they yield up various clues, and even the blood-red chandelier takes a star turn in a show-stopping number. Combined with Alex Gay's punchy lighting and John Lepard's cartoonish sound, the entire effect is both playful and elegant.

If you love a piano, goofball comedy, and sparkling lyrics, *Murder for Two* is sure to delight you.

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