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'Moon Over Buffalo'*By Sophie Braccini*

George Hay (Jerry Motta) and Howard (Carter Chastain) Photo Stu Selland

Town Hall Theatre is ending its 2014-15 season with a sure success: the well-mastered production of the hilarious comedy by Ken Ludwig, "Moon Over Buffalo." With the right dosage of slapstick humor and the excellent delivery by the cast, the show is a "must see" for anyone desiring a dose of laughter therapy.

There are always risks associated with slapstick humor; too much incongruity or a weak scenario can lead audiences down a bumpy road. But with Ludwig's solid text (he also wrote "Lend Me A Tenor") and the strong cast of professional actors chosen by veteran director Scott Fryer, the Town Hall Theatre Company delivers. The performance is just enough over-the-top funny without being annoying or artificial.

The story focuses on the crazy chain of events lived by George and Charlotte Hay, second-tier actors from the 1950s still reaching for the moon in Buffalo, N.Y. An opportunity suddenly presents itself to them for a second chance at stardom when director Frank Capra himself plans to come see their performance that very day, but everything

seems to conspire against them as they prepare for the big event.

The first act starts smoothly as a young couple gets ready to meet the future in-laws, then takes a sharp turn when Cyrano de Bergerac and Roxanne spring on stage in a rambunctious and well-orchestrated sword fight. Laughs increase as George Hay starts losing control of the situation. Intermission comes with an offer of the house cocktail: an Irish coffee. Those who decide to enjoy the drink will get its full meaning as the second act begins, and will feel a part of the developing story.

The second act is the most hilarious. The night this reporter went to see the play, members of the audience roared almost continuously with laughter as Cyrano de Bergerac and The Comedy of Errors kept colliding, George kept disappearing, and Frank Capra got gagged and locked up in a closet. The story is filled with misunderstandings, twists and surprises, but when the dust settles and the curtain falls, the audience's faces have grins of intense satisfaction.

The actors offer a stellar performance. Beth Chastain, who plays Charlotte Hay, is the bedrock around which everything becomes believable. A mix of pragmatism, passion and selfishness, she is an actress, a wife and mother, torn between her desire for a little more stability and her love for theater. She manages to remain somewhat poised, as her husband, George Hay (Jerry Motta), spirals out of control in a funny and energetic performance. Their daughter, Rosalind Hay (Heather Kellogg), is refreshingly funny with her desire to escape from the family business and live a normal life.

Because the play is well written, the characters deepen as the story develops, eliciting sympathy from the audience. For example, Paul (Justin DuPuis) starts out a bit mousy, but develops into someone quite dashing as the story unfolds. Grandma Ethel (Ann Kendrick) also goes through a metamorphosis, from hunched, grumpy and nagging, to still grumpy, but beautiful and regal. Poor Howard, played by Carter Chastain (Beth Chastain's son), keeps getting the door slammed in his face, but he gets his moment of fame impersonating General Patton. Tom Reilly, as

lawyer Richard, succeeds in remaining steady and calm, while Eileen (Jenna Stich) manages to get the upper hand.

There are a few crude elements that result in the PG13 rating of the play, but they are dwarfed by all of the other very positive aspects of this story.

"Moon Over Buffalo" runs at Town Hall Theatre through June 13, with a special Theatre Club Night on Friday June 5, which includes free wine and talk-back session with the director and cast immediately following the performance. For tickets, visit www.townhalltheatre.com.

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