

Published October 7th, 2015

## Sparkling Like a Good Champagne

By Sophie Braccini



From left: Dennis Markam (Mr. William Cartwright/The Chairman), Michael Doppe (Neville Landless), John Blytt (Rev. Crisparkle) and Jennifer Weiner (Helena Landless), Melynda Kiring (Princess Puffer), Nicole Thordsen (Rosa Bud), Ted Zoldan (John Jasper), Alex Moore (Bazzard), Suzie Shepard (Edwin Drood) Photo Stu Selland

actors to the audience as they are about to perform "The Mystery of Edwin Drood." This technique creates a distance around the main drama as well as comic effect, underlining the artificial aspect of the play, while creating a connivance with the public who is asked from the start to participate in the presentation.

The humorous stage direction is served with flamboyance by the cast playing their 19th century characters, all with a bit of appropriate over dramatization. The bad guy is really bad, the mysterious one is quite disturbing, and the sweet girl could not be more naive and vulnerable. There are many funny twists and turns, such as the actor Philippe Bax, played by Alex Moore, who is craving a bigger part, trying to attract attention and is finally given a song to sing supported by the entire cast of the Music Hall Royale.

Since the play is a musical, all the actors are professional singers - a special note to Melinda Kiring, who plays Princess Puffer, for her nice vibrato. The music interspersed throughout the play adds to the lightness of the evening, to the rhythm and choreography on stage.

The first act ends exactly where Dickens stopped the novel. Completely. The actors stop in the middle of their action and wonder where to go next. The second act is created by the audience.

Spectators go downstairs for the intermission, where they can indulge in the special cocktail created for the play and wonder what will come next. When they return to their seats, all the main characters are on stage holding a number. Four of the actors go through the rows of spectators actively questioning them and tallying who people think is the culprit.

And the main characters discover who the culprit of the night is at the same time the audience does. Backstage the actors who took the poll count the results, and the only ones who know who was chosen are Durdles (played by Derek Travis Collard) who will announce it and conductor/pianist Margaret Halbig who will play different songs according to which character is chosen, says Roster.

The most entertaining play of the season in Lafayette, "The Mystery of Edwin Drood," is built upon a very serious foundation: the last Charles Dickens novel that was left unfinished due to his death on June 9, 1870. But as the book was incomplete, it gave Ruppert Holmes, playwright and songwriter, the idea to create an engaging musical that would involve audiences in deciding what really happened to Edwin Drood.

Lafayette's Town Hall Theatre Company has taken on the 1986 Broadway creation, which swept all of the Tony Awards that year. The 13 actors are led at a boisterous pace by master of ceremonies Dennis Markam, who is at the top of his game. The cast rehearsed 200 possible endings to the play and every night they deliver with gusto the conclusion chosen by their audience.

"I saw the show 11 years ago and found it to be much infectious fun," said THT artistic director Joel Roster, who directed Edwin Drood, "and I came back six times to see different endings."

The action is set as a play within a play. The audience is in the presence of the British theater company, "The Music Hall Royale," led by the Chairman (Dennis Markam) who introduces the

"When the culprit is announced on stage, the actors have no idea who was chosen. They have to immediately step into the chosen scenario." For an actor that is an incredible challenge, says Roster, but it is also a lot of fun.

The actors' enjoyment is contagious. They require a bit of improvisational talent, since audiences react differently each night. Roster relies on Markam's brilliance and improv talent to round out each night with panache.

The energetic and fast-paced play is a sure crowd pleaser for THT. "The Mystery of Edwin Drood" is the first production of the 71st season of the local theater and will run through Oct. 24. It will be followed by Mary Chase's "Harvey" for the holiday season. For information and tickets, visit [www.townhalltheatre.com](http://www.townhalltheatre.com).

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