

Review: 'Gypsy' teases just enough for Theatre Arlington's season opener

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By Rich Lopez



Theatre Arlington kicked off its 50th anniversary season with a classic. TA opened the season last Friday with *Gypsy: A Musical Fable*. The classic stage mother story based on the true story of performer Gypsy Rose Lee was directed by TA's Executive Producer Steven D. Morris.

Set in the 1920s days of burlesque and vaudeville, the story centers on Mama Rose (Brandy Raper) an ambitious stage mother who has three ex-husbands but she don't need no man when looking after her star daughter June (Tenley Heugatter) and her not-so-much star daughter Louise (Nahiara Zoe Lopez). As they navigate through variety shows and stages, Rose ultimately gives her focus to teenage June (Tilda Grace) while Louise (Presley Duyck) inherently becomes the family's bystander. Rose also meets Herbie (Brian Hathaway) a former agent she convinces to help them as well as stokes a budding interest in him along the way. June leaves the family to get married and escape her mother which leaves Louise to take on the eye of Rose's ambition. She blossoms into the big star Gypsy Rose Lee which ultimately causes conflict with her mother.

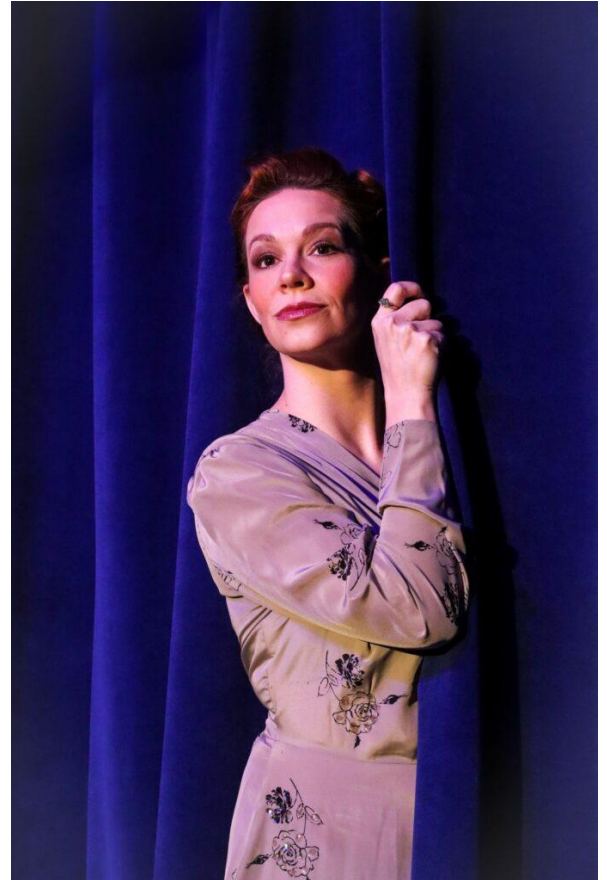
Raper carried the show on opening weekend's Saturday night from her first steps on stage. She carried that dichotomous weight of a mother with good intentions for her children that also hinder them as well.

Her dynamic with the younger actors was nurturing as well as intense. Raper was no Mommie Dearest. She played Mama Rose with charm and sophistication but also an intensity that was not scary but disheartening. She maintained this balancing act with supreme skill, but she was never without heart.

Act I was more focused on June and as the older version, Grace really showed off all her dancing and singing chops that left her unforgettable. And Hathaway's Herbie was a tender performance. He straddled the fine line of being a devoted partner in love and business to Rose while also becoming a father figure to the girls – namely Louise.

As Louise, Pruyck delivered an astonishingly transformative performance – to the point that it was almost hard to imagine she also played the meek teenage Louise in the first act. As she became the notable performer, Pruyck really staked her claim onstage to share the drama with Raper.

Vonda K. Bowling's music direction was spot on with her orchestra conveying the time period with its jaunty sound and a pretty sweet overture. Familiar songs like "Let Me Entertain You" and "Everything's Coming Up Roses" are high points but Raper's big song "Rose's Turn" with the orchestra was magical. The cast and music was top notch. What missed the mark was the set design. The set pieces worked well and efficiently in and out of the stage, but Act I suffered from a lack of a backdrop – or even a curtain. Ironically, the plain projection screen was so distracting to the already-sparse set. When a see through curtain was set up to evoke a backstage set, it was a dramatic difference. Act II had the luxury of set pieces on stage the majority of the time to help tell the story.



Speaking of Act II, the performances of Samantha Padilla, Aly Badalamenti and Mattie Lillian Davis as the three experienced strippers as well as Jude Laine Lewis' Agnes can not go unmentioned. The former trio injected a whole new energy into the show with an "uh" and a "uh" as dancers with their different acts in "You Gotta Get a Gimmick." Lewis was delightful playing one of Louise's blondes backup dancers, but they also played those moments onstage with bubbly complexity.

Morris directed a fine opener to the season with a strong and fabulous cast that certainly had its "Gimmick" down pat.

Gypsy runs through March 5 with TA's Pride Night on March 4.