

GYPSY – A MUSICAL FABLE @ Theatre Arlington

Music by Jule Styne
Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim
Book by Arthur Laurents

Reviewed Performance: 2/10/2023

Reviewed by Charlie Bowles, Associate Critic for John Garcia's THE COLUMN

The audience has filled Theatre Arlington. The theater business is beginning to recover, and audiences are hungry. The anticipation of opening night is palpable as lights go down on the opening show in Theatre Arlington's new season. That's entertainment.

There was a time when future stars, who dreamed of big shows, bright lights, and stardom, could not get past an audition. But for a few, the breakthroughs were fabulous. Silent films, the fledgling talkies, and television provided actors with challenges as each new technology disrupted the prior medium. For a few in each generation, there was fabulous wealth and fame. For the rest, they found small successes or quit. But, for a very few, they continued to search for a niche in the old forms of entertainment, to get back to the glorious old days.

Rose Elizabeth Thompson Hovic was a stage mom, in fact, the archetype of that term. Rose and her daughters, Ellen June and Rose Louise lived when times were bad when the medium was changing. When success was impossible, they were called on to change with the times. Louise, who became Gypsy Rose Lee, rose to a level we've seen recently, entertainers who flaunted their sexuality to support their art, whether film, dance, music or just public entertainment. For the 20's and 30's, that was the change from vaudeville to burlesque.

As the lights go down, the opening music that leads us into *Gypsy – A Musical Fable*, is played by an unseen band off-stage. This musical from the imaginations of Jule Styne (music), Stephen Sondheim (lyrics), and Arthur Laurents (book) has been a favorite of audiences since its opening in 1959. Even in modern popular musical theater, *Gypsy* was as big in '59 as *Les Mis*, *Wicked* or *Hairspray* was when they played in their early years. The songs of *Gypsy* are among the most popular show tunes of all time. "Everything's Coming up Roses," "You Gotta Get a Gimmick" and "Let Me Entertain You" have been covered by musical artists and auditioners for a 30-years.

Theatre Arlington tapped their Executive Producer, Steven D. Morris, to direct this season opener. It's clearly a win as he has matched the energy of that original hit. His production team and this cast work well to tell this story, which turns out to be surprisingly more about families than entertainment.

The Theatre Arlington stage was turned into a flexible range of settings with easily movable parts by a team of Set Designer (Bryan Stevenson), Set Dresser (Kevin Brown), and Properties Designer (Robin Dotson). Numerous scenes occur on stages, casting rooms or backroom rehearsal halls, a hotel, and other locations. By moving a few portable mini-stages, changes were easy and quick. Lights treated these locations with a variety of lighting plots, another role for designer Bryan Stevenson. Ryan Simón created a plethora of sound cues for all these locations and a rash of sound effects and backstage voices. There are many properties across the scenes, some used by actors, others for effects. Robin Dotson made sure actors had lots of items for stage business.



Karen Potter did a yeoman job of providing costumes for actors playing their characters in the story, but also a huge number of costumes for when actors' characters played their "on stage" roles. A look at the actor list above will show the challenge of this task. And this was complicated by quick-change transitions, in some cases different looks in the time of a few bars of a song. Well done!

Gypsy is a show that requires strong direction in acting, choreography and music.

Music Director, Vonda K. Bowling, was the link to make these songs come alive, songs which have been sung by a raft of artists since 1959. Those songs must live within the storyline and those lyrics by Stephen Sondheim had to be sung with great skill, as the songs convey much of the meaning of the story. In addition, Bowling was the pianist and conductor of that backstage band, which consisted of keyboards (Mark Mullino), reed instruments (Christian Gonzalez), trumpet (Carlos Strudwick), and drums (Kami Lujan). She also had to teach songs to the large cast, a task worthy of some of those early full-orchestra 1950's musical styles.

There's a great deal of movement, by actors of all ages, not only in the life movements of their characters but also in the various roles those characters played. And there are, of course, dance sequences throughout. Managing all these movements fell to choreographer, Nichole Jamie Carrano, in concert with Director Morris' stage movements and blocking. Subtle changes in the stage action distinguished when characters were performing their character roles versus when they were the characters between their performing scenes. It seemed pretty complex as actors changed to a different character or different stage performance roles. Characters grew up, often playing the same performances but at later ages. It's all quite impressive.

The book by Arthur Laurents also tells the parallel story of Louise as she finds her way out of Rose's control to find her own life. Director Morris pulled out characterizations by all these actors. The audience saw a bunch of characters playing roles, saying lines, singing, and dancing, and yet a theme came through. Morris did a masterful job of pulling all these facets of performance, both in the story between characters.

Gypsy has a lot of characters with multiple actors playing multiple roles. Across the show, actors, including quite young actors, were often in a maelstrom of stage business, sometimes with fast action, that could intimidate adult actors. Across the show, all these actors, young and old, created their own unique characters, played those characters amongst that chaos, and provided the audience with much to look at. And for numerous smaller roles, they shifted to different characters with unique qualities, different costumes and props, and different voices. This was a cast who got the story and Director Morris' vision of how this would unfold.

The primary story of *Gypsy* is that Rose, the Rose Elizabeth Thompson Hovic of history, had two daughters at a time when it was hard to support them as a single mother. Rose had been a performer in the age of vaudeville. So, it was natural for her to look for ways to use her daughters in the industry she knew well. So, as some parents do, she decided if she can't be the star, she would make her daughters stars.

Brandy Raper played Rose with the gravitas you'd expect of an iconic character. It is the most developed storyline, the one with the most character arc and room for most development. And she made the most of those opportunities. Raper is part of almost half the songs in the show, including four solos and a couple of duets. She showed a strong, trained voice. Her portrayal of Rose's backstory and subtext was so strong it revealed Rose's private thoughts, even as she is faced with disappointments that would break mere mortals. But Rose is not a mere mortal. She has flaws, but also a strength that models how actors could handle their own rejections, but also maybe a lesson on being a stage mom.

Rose's most famous song is "Everything's Coming Up Roses," but for my money, Raper's performance of Rose's closing song, "Rose's Turn," is a favorite. Raper nailed this on a bare stage, alone with her interpretation of Rose's important learning. I challenge anyone to experience this without a bit of emotion. It was powerful.

Two of those songs Raper sang was with Brian Hathaway, as Herbie. Herbie is the love interest who becomes the kid's agent and fights for them against Rose's constant pressure and outbursts with casting agents. He loves Rose and tries against all obstacles to get her to see him for his love. Hathaway was himself a strong vocalist who put Herbie's character dreams and

disappointments in his songs. His duets with Raper in “Small World” and “You’ll Never Get Away From Me” are powerful statements of his intentions. Their duets are love songs that set Herbie’s dreams for their relationship.

Rose’s daughters are June and Louise. June is the one with star quality from early ages, while Louise is the one with no apparent talent. In *Gypsy*, we first see them as Baby June (Tenly Heugatter) and Baby Louise (Nahiara Zoe Lopez) as they perform their mother’s acts. Baby is a stage name, not an indication of their ages. Flashy and obviously talented Baby June is what the whole act promotes, as she is the apple of her mother’s eye, the example of what Rose believes is the epitome of star quality. Baby Louise is the shrinking violet, mostly ignored by her mother, recognized as untalented.

The girls eventually grow into teenagers and the act grows with them. Now older, June is played by Tilda Grace and Louise is played by Presley Duyck. But with age comes the need to adapt, so Rose creates a new act for them. But older kids begin questioning and challenging of Rose’s decisions. Eventually, June makes her own choice to leave the troop. So, Rose retools the act to focus on Louise, with comic, and a few sad, outcomes. These two actors showed glimpses of their own talents, even though the script and songs call for worse. In one song that let June and Louise describe their mother, we saw Grace and Duyck duet with *If Momma Was Married*. This is a fun romp that allowed them to show off their exceptional musical skills.

Rose did not accept the changes from the vaudeville style prior to the 20s, a more comedic and artistic genre, to burlesque, closer to bars and stripping. Yet, that’s where they ended up and this is the turning point. Big decisions have to be made and the story suddenly focuses on Louise. All that starts at the Wichita Burlesque Theater, where Louise becomes *Gypsy*.

Gypsy Rose Lee grows up at that performance and goes on to perform at all the world’s best burlesque houses, including the world-famous Minsky’s. In her day, Louise was box office, earning fabulous wealth and fame. She eventually also had movie, TV and book credits.

At Wichita, we meet three delightful characters and their actors who take the audience on a wild ride. Tessie Tura (Mattie Lillian Davis), Miss Mazeppa (Samantha Padilla), and Electra (Aly Badalamenti) are the old, experienced strippers in the theater who take Louise under their wing. One of the iconic songs in *Gypsy* is “You Gotta Get a Gimmick,” where they tell her how to become a stripper. But until you see this performed by three, ballsy belters, in three of the most outrageous stripper costumes, with their unique props, you haven’t understood this song. This number brought down the house – one of those moments when the audience just had to have time to express their appreciation.

Gypsy has held up well because it took a complicated history of a dysfunctional family and simplified it to its most basic storyline. Mama Rose’s dream is unfulfilled, so she tries to live through her daughters. They must decide whether to go along with their mom’s dream, in spite of how degrading it seems. Rose’s love interest, Herbie, has to decide if his own dream of love and family can come true while Rose’s dream for her daughters is her priority. These are identifiable themes that have affected families throughout history.

Theatre Arlington started its 50th Anniversary Season with an outstanding production at a time when we are just now coming out of years of difficulty for live theater. I’m glad Theatre Arlington has stepped back into this world to bring us the live theater experience again. And I recommend *Gypsy – A Musical Fable* as an outstanding evening of humor, music, dance and a thoughtful story. That’s entertainment!

GYPSY – A MUSICAL FABLE

**Theatre Arlington
Arlington’s Cultural Arts District
305 W. Main Street
Arlington, TX. 76010**

Plays through Sunday, March 5th

**Thursdays, Fridays & Saturdays at 7:30 pm
Sundays at 2 pm**

Tickets: \$35 (plus \$2 fee)

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Note: Adult Content