

StageWest's 'Kiss Me' invigorating

By TONY ANGARANO
Special to the Courier

StageWest's lavish revival of Cole Porter's musical "Kiss Me Kate," which opened Saturday, may bankrupt the company, but the money is well-spent. True to the original, yet refreshingly resourceful, the Springfield production preserves Porter's incomparable songs, Bella and Samuel Spewack's witty book and Shakespeare's bawdy text without directorial revision.

A superlative cast rejuvenates this American classic with performances in the best musical-theater tradition. Until "Kate" rightfully returns to Broadway, where it opened in 1948 for 1,077 performances, StageWest offers the best opportunity to see why "Kate" is still great.

The Spewacks' script cleverly juxtaposes the plot of Shakespeare's "The Taming of the Shrew," a verbal and physical battle of the sexes, with the off-stage antics of actors trying out the comedy in Baltimore. The leading man/director and the leading lady are divorced but still in love. He has an insufferable ego and she has an incendiary temper; so their Shakespearean roles parallel their real lives. The zany subplot concerns supporting players who add other complications: The ingenue's boyfriend is a compulsive gambler who signs other people's names to IOUs. When he falsely uses the leading man's name, two gangsters comes to the theater to collect the debt and become part of the Shakespearean hijinks.

Creating such a big-scale musical on StageWest's small thrust stage presents technical challenges that director Howard Millman, scenic designer Miguel Romero and choreographer Diana Baffa-Brill successfully meet. Millman's inventive direction, with its sure sense of comedy, uses the limitations of the playing area with maximum effect. Romero has constructed a proscenium to frame his colorful, realistic two-story revolving set. Boffa-Brill's dance sequences serve mainly as fillers between the scenes, but her



Richard Feldman

■ Mark Hardy and Ann Kittredge in Cole Porter's musical "Kiss Me Kate" at StageWest.

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choreography has a theatrical style suitable to the score. Polly J. Byers' Shakespearean costumes and 1940s period fashions add genuine visual dimension; the show looks just as it did in 1948 without seeming like a self-conscious relic.

In roles originated by Alfred Drake, Patricia Morison, Lisa Kirk and Harold Lang, StageWest's "troupe of strolling players" features Mark Hardy, Ann Kittredge, Mylinda Hull and Steven Petrillo who create memorable characterizations. Hardy's pleasing baritone is lighter than Drake's (or Howard Keel's in the movie version) but musically and dramatically expressive. As Fred Graham, he sings "Were Thine That Special Face" and "So in Love" with persuasive ardor. Acting the hammy star and the swaggering lady-tamer, he dominates the stage with his virile presence and bedroom eyes.

Kittredge, as Lilli Vanessi, outsings and out-acts Morison (and MGM's Kathryn Grayson) with a golden voice and a theatrical temperament that can switch from haughty to bawdy. Her version of "So in Love" is perfection. Singing a ferocious "I Hate Men," she could intimidate anybody. While today's feminists might object to her submissive "I Am Ashamed That Women Are So Simple," blame Shakespeare and the Spewacks. Her scenes with Hardy,

particularly the famous "Wonderbar" duet sparked with a sophisticated style that seemed entirely natural.

Hull, as Lois Lane, has great fun with the tongue-twisting "Always True to You in My Fashion," reprising the racy refrains with droll sexuality. In "Why Can't You Behave?" she sings with a bluesy poignancy.

In supporting roles, Raymond C. Harris ignites the stage with his sultry "Too Darn Hot;" Kimberly Harris' fine voice sets the performance standard with her "Another Op'nin," which begins the show; Stephen Van Benschoten makes his parody of a Washington politician particularly timeless; Larry Cahn and Howard Samuelsohn brings down the house with their vaudevillian duet "Brush Up Your Shakespeare."

The production's main liability is the orchestra. Since StageWest has no pit, the musicians played in the wings, with the sound miked to speakers surrounding the stage. As a result, the singers were often out-of-sync with conductor Paul Ascenzo, who also adapted Porter's score for a seven-piece ensemble.

StageWest presents "Kiss Me Kate" through May 6 with performances Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays and Sundays at 7:30 p.m., Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m., and 2 p.m. matinees on Saturday, April 22, Wednesday, April 26, and Sundays, April 16, 23 and 30. Information: (413) 781-2340.

Griffit

Reprinted from
Monday's Courier
By MICHAEL
Courant.

Nanci Griffith has a sophisticated, beautifully crafted

But, for fans a show at the Palace in her hometown. Griffith has four self somewhere folk, country, pop genres. She built following with and songwriting quality. Along played, written beer with just a cian who has r mark on popula

Twenty year stepped onto a in her hometown. Griffith has four self somewhere folk, country, pop genres. She built following with and songwriting quality. Along played, written beer with just a cian who has r mark on popula

Maya

By ROBERT
Courant.

There are f could say ed some est blues-rock g Eric Clapton an

There are few boast more than living in the while producing strong records.

One such s Mayall, who hit Bluesbreakers Toad's Place ir showed a pack has been dubb British Blues.

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A poster pr album, "Spinni frequently urge out and buy, h board. Most of