

THEATER REVIEW

Laughing your way through history

Nancy STETSON

nstetson@floridaweekly.com



Sometimes it seems that Broadway producers are engaged in some kind of Theater Olympics where musicals have to be bigger, gaudier, and more over-the-top than the ones that came before it.

In "The Big Bang," playing at the Florida Repertory Theatre, two producers, Boyd (Gary Marachek) and Jed (Jason Parrish) want to put on the "Biggest Musical Ever!!!!"

With 318 actors, 6,428 costumes and 1,400 wigs, this 12-hour extravaganza will tell the entire history of the world, from creation to current time. In fact, it'll take 120 dancers just to tell the history of modern dance, including Bob Fosse, Alvin Ailey, Michael Bennett and Martha Graham.

Boyd and Jed are trying to raise \$83.5 million to produce this musical-on-steroids. And we, the audience, are their potential backers. Gathering in an understated, posh New York City penthouse, the two over-reaching, incredibly misguided producers attempt to woo us by putting on highlights from their ludicrous musical. They are so naïve, so eager-to-please, so desperate.

It begins with "One Big Bang!" the opening number about the creation of the world, then goes into "Free Food & Frontal Nudity," in which Boyd and Jed portray Adam and Eve. Mr. Parrish drapes himself with ivy for hair, which, Godiva-like, also cover Eve's breasts. The two nude men hide behind the sofa, and when it's time to sing and dance center stage, they cover themselves front and back with large pillows.

The two lurch through history, acting out key milestones, whether it's wisecracking Jewish slaves building the pyramids and wanting to exodus Egypt, or two chefs cooking for the obese Henry VIII.

If Rocky and Bullwinkle gave us fractured fairy tales, this duo gives us fractured history, populated with stereotypes. No one is immune, as they (mis-)represent Italians, Irish, Jews, Catholics, Hindus, whites, African-Americans, Native Americans, and Asian characters.

One of my favorites was "Wake Up, Caesar!" in which Julius Caesar (Mr. Parrish) is visited by a soothsayer

(Mr. Marachek), who warns him of his upcoming murder. It is Julius Caesar meets "The Godfather," as the two do their best Marlon Brando impersonations while draped in makeshift togas.

All the costumes, by the way, are makeshift, as Boyd and Jed use whatever they can find in the penthouse, from drapes to plants to fringes on the pillows. Some of the costumes are so creative and so unexpected — for example, the way they make a hoop skirt for Boyd in a Civil War scene — that they drew applause from the laughing audience.

Of course the costumes, made from props and the set, are actually a careful collaboration between Roberta Malcolm, Florida Rep's resident costume designer and Jim Hunter, the set and lighting designer. They are nothing short of ingenious, and genuinely funny.

Another highlight is "New World," in which Christopher Columbus (Mr. Parrish) tries to convince Queen Isabella (Mr. Marachek) to give

him ships so he can discover a better route

to India, and also discover a New World, which he promises he'll call "The United States of Isabella."

Mr. Marachek chews up the scenery as Queen Isabella, but this is one of those shows where the whole point is to chew up the scenery and be over the top. And the more over the top they are, the more hysterical the audience became.

"The Big Bang" is so funny that you think the theater's been filled with laughing gas. There is nothing deep here, no last-act reconciliation, no deathbed scene, no lovers reuniting, no lessons learned. Thank God.

"The Big Bang" is just sheer fun, pure stupid silliness, a musical stuffed to bursting with visual jokes, musical jokes, verbal jokes, and physical jokes. It's a workout for the two actors, as they are both on stage almost all of the time in this intermission-less show. Mr. Boyd has a solo as Attila the Hun and as a man singing a love song to the last potato during the Great Potato Famine. Mr. Parrish charms as a lion that eats Christians in the coliseum. Later in the show he brings down the house as Eva Braun, singing, "Loving Him is Where I Went Wrong" while dressed in trench coat, white pumps and men's black socks.

The "modern" references don't seem to work quite as well, as Sonny and Cher aren't quite that modern. (After all, Sonny Bono died in a skiing accident a dozen years ago.) It's interesting that a Napoleon and Josephine number received more laughs. But this is just a quibble. If one joke doesn't tickle your funny bone, don't worry; there are plenty more jokes coming.

Everything and

in the know

>> "The Big Bang"

>> **Where:** Florida Repertory Theatre, 2267 Bay Street, Fort Myers, in the Arcade Theatre in downtown Fort Myers, between Hendry and Jackson

>> **When:** through May 23

>> **Cost:** \$38 and \$42

>> **Information:** 332-4488 or www.FloridaRep.org

>> **Note:** There is a pre-show, so arrive early to catch it.

everyone gets mocked or mentioned in this musical, from Sammy Davis Jr. and Sinatra to Gilbert and Sullivan. Not only are there musical references (thanks to composer Jed Feuer) but myriad lyrical references (thanks to Boyd Graham, who wrote the book and clever lyrics).

Director Robert Cacioppo makes it all look spontaneous and off-the-cuff, while choreographer Amy Marie McCleary gets them to dance and move in ways that are funny and not-too-polished. (Check out Mr. Marachek's wiggles as Nefertiti.) Pianist Edward Reichert, the bemused calm in the midst of all the craziness, accompanies Mr. Parrish and Mr. Marachek on stage.

And while it makes fun of theater, "The Big Bang" is also a tribute to it, reminding us of the sense of play, and how it only takes a few props and great imagination to put on a show. Need a laugh? Go see it. ■



COURTESY PHOTO
Jason Parrish and Gary Marachek in "The Big Bang" at the Florida Repertory Theatre through May 23.

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