

The Zebra

Black & White and Read All Over!

NEAL LEARNER'S "LIFE: A COMIC OPERA IN THREE SHORT ACTS" WILL SURPRISE YOU AT D.C.'S FRINGE FESTIVAL

Posted on | July 10, 2017

By Sara Dudley Brown, Theatre Reviewer



"Life: A Comic Opera in Three Short Acts" set, Photo by Clare Shaffer

Last night's presentation of "Life: A Comic Opera in Three Short Acts" at the D.C. Fringe Festival, treated me to a totally new way of looking at life from birth to death. I was present during the sweet and often hilarious courtship of Joan and Charles (all sung, of course), the somewhat difficult birth of their twins, Sally and Max, and witnessed much of their interesting life through the craziness of toddlers and adolescence, getting the twins off to college, then the incredibly emotional deaths of not one, but both parents. It's all well-sung, seamlessly blending the styles of opera, Broadway, jazz, pop, and doo wop AND it's all packed into an opera in three acts finishing in a little over an hour. It's amazing how much emotional impact this piece has. To my ear, happily, the overall style of music and the structure of the show are much like a very modern Gian Carlo Menotti. I enjoyed every minute of this totally engrossing

production and I think you will, too! The voices are simply wonderful. Each actor/singer has special gifts to offer the audience through their personality, their genuine love and sometimes

loathing for each other, their youthful energy, and their total embrace of this funny, beautiful, witty, and hummable musical score and book written by local Del Ray musician, Neal Learner. More on that a little later...



L-R: Dallas Milholland (Mother), Joshua Simon (Father), Will Hawkins (Max), and Stefany Pesta (Sally) singing "We're Here!" Photo by Shaffer

But wait now! Before you, my gentle readers, decide to move on to the next review, here are some housekeeping basics about this year's D.C. Fringe Festival and this particular short opera (1 hour 5 minutes!) you might want to know before you head down there—or perhaps you've heard that the productions are just too *avant garde* to bother with reading further. Yes, many of the offerings of the Fringe Festival here in D.C. need to be researched a little before you go, but deciding to see this one is a no-brainer. It could be paired up with "Pagliacci" and presented by the Washington National Opera (and, by the way, I think it SHOULD be).

The theatre is located in the Eastman Studio Theatre on the Gallaudet Campus, 800 Florida Avenue, NE, Washington, D.C., just to the right of the main gate. There is parking close to the theatre if you are early and a parking garage nearby that's free. And there are 4 performances left: July 15, 16, 18, and 23. For tickets: visit www.capitalfringe.org/ or call 866-811-411, or just pick them up at the door: \$17 each plus a \$7 one-time fee Fringe button. Easy peasy!

Now, back to the show! The genius of what Neal Learner has achieved here is combining the various styles of music, the complex rhythms and harmonies, and pairing them with beautiful, interesting voices. He has also kept the story line simple, and for the most part all the characters behave in pretty much normal ways, just going about their unremarkable lives. However, through the magic of Learner's music and brilliant lyrics (which are projected on a supertitle machine so you won't miss a word!), we become caught up in their everyday lives and hope for the best outcome possible in each situation. This show mirrors real life, not a fairy tale, so things pretty much go along without any dreadful tragedies or horrible struggles, just a witty and sometimes moving celebration of the beauty of the arc of life from its beginning to its end.



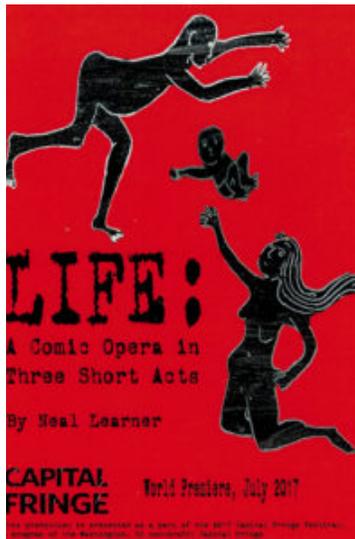
L-R: Dallas Milholland (Mother), Joshua Simon (Father), Stefany Pesta (Sally), and Will Hawkins (Max), Photo by Clare Shaffer

The set is memorable in its quiet simplicity. Just 4 chairs and an oriental looking carpet which are used for every possible situation, including for birthing a baby, for jumping on, playing on, and for dying on. Hand puppets held by the actors playing the children are great examples of the imaginative but spare props. The costumes, completely pedestrian and muted, are exactly right for each situation. The lighting is also seriously good. E-hui Woo makes the spare set shine and helps move the scenes and action along while making the actors sparkle.

Again, there are no outrageous situations—just hilarious ones born of families interacting with each other as families do. Yet, you are totally drawn into this engrossing work. And when the end comes for Mother and Father—watch out! It's very powerful and will completely catch you off guard. The engaging music moves the story inexorably toward the expected conclusion, but sucks you into the nuances of the story telling in such poignant songs as "Pain," "The Stars Aligned," or "Baby Names" (OMG, this was so funny, it brought down the house!), "I am Perfect," (again—total genius writing and a terrific performance by Stefany Pesta), "Where Am I? or The Dementia Waltz," and "That's Life." These are just a few of the two dozen or so brilliant songs that pack this 65 minute musical.

The cast and crew are made up of seasoned veterans, not in years, but in the depth of their work. Dallas Milholland (Joan or Mother), has a rich theatrical and musical background from playing Ariel in "The Tempest" and Rosalind in "As You Like it" to Mrs. Lovett in "Sweeney Todd." Her voice is rich and velvety in all registers and lovely to hear. Joshua Simon (Charles or Father) was recently seen at Imagination Stage in "Beauty and the Beast" as well as in "Floyd Collins" at First Stage. He has an open and impish stage presence, but shows gravitas through his beautiful dancing and lovely singing. Stefany Pesta as Sally and Will Hawkins as Max make up the balance of the cast. They provide much of the lively entertainment

through ebullient dancing and great singing, as well as lively screaming matches as brother and sisters are apt to have. When you witness “I Want My Truck” sung by two whining kids, you’ll know what I mean. Both actors/singers have varied professional stage experience and handle themselves beautifully.



Again, this production is as real as real life can be and we are privy to the family members’ problems within the family as well as their struggles in life. Neal Learner, the writer/composer of this excellent production, has an extremely eclectic background in music, attending the University of Michigan’s School of Music and playing several instruments as well as singing. Along the way he made a career of journalism and communications while raising a family and continuing his songwriting. Learner, along with the Del Ray Players, are presenting this musical. Clare Shaffer, the director of “Life,” who specializes in new play/musical development, has worked with many well-known theatre companies here in the Metro area. She has put her undeniable stamp on this production! Rounding out the crew are Choreographer Bryan Stopak, whose witty dance moves enhance the action, Musical Director Brandon Scott Heishman, whose keyboard accompaniment and musical direction

provide great support to the singers and wonderful entertainment for us, and “Life’s” indefatigable stage manager, Caelan Tietze.

Don’t miss it! I promise you an unforgettable evening of great music, greater emotions, and tons of fun. And, like me, you may not be able to get these marvelous songs out of your head. I might have to go back to hear and see this again! Sigh. The joy of being a theatre reviewer!

For Theatre and Ticket Information:

The theatre is located in the Eastman Studio Theatre on the Gallaudet Campus, 800 Florida Avenue, NE, Washington, DC, just to the right of the main gate. There is parking close to the theatre if you are early and a parking garage nearby that’s free. And there are only 4 more performances: Sat. July 15 at 5:00 pm, Sun. July 16 at 4:15 pm, Tues July 18 at 9:15 pm, and Sun. July 23 at 5:45 pm. **For tickets:** visit www.capitalfringe.org/ or call 866-811-411, or just pick them up at the door: \$17 each plus a \$7 one-time-fee Fringe button.

<http://thezebra.org/life-a-comic-opera-in-three-short-acts-will-surprise-you-at-d-c-s-fringe-festival/>