

‘Bright Star’ ushers in ambitious Peppermint Creek season

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Review by David Winkelstern
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The opening song to “Bright Star” feels like a rousing act closer, or a stirring tune usually saved for a finale. It’s clear from the start that “Bright Star” is a musical with clout.



“If You Knew My Story” begins with Amanda DeKatch’s colossal voice filling Peppermint Creek’s new, cavernous space inside the Central United Methodist Church.

Based on true events, DeKatch plays Alice, a young mom with a traumatic destiny. Sea turtles can hold their breath up to seven hours. With her impressive lungpower, I’m guessing DeKatch could make it to eight. She is joined by a harmonious collection of vocalists who take the song to a resounding climax.

The first song should be a tough act to follow. Since all the music by Steve Martin and Edie Brickell is lively, emotional and potent, the 21 following songs in the musical never seem anticlimactic. And having a large cast with large singing voices makes great songs sound even greater.

Lots of players in “Bright Star” get chances to wail. Matthew Bill as Jimmy Ray is strongest when he belts out a song. Sally Hecksel’s excitable Margo offers singing that soars. Judy Evans as Mama Murphy blows the freckles off her younger castmates.

Talented musicians help to achieve the heights “Bright Star”’s music reaches. A superior, six-piece band directed by Seth Burk provides a nearly continual, countrified bluegrass template for melodic songs that inspire joy and gut wrenching grief.

The harmonies of the cast are as smooth as their movements. Karyn Perry provides intricate and synchronized choreography that often flows from end-to-end of the spacious CUMC theater area.

Director Chad Swan-Badgero accomplishes the seemingly impossible task of blocking 16 actors entering from opposite corners of the hall — and sometimes occupying the real stage that almost begs not be ignored.

Instead of facing the stage, the audience is seated in rows lined up against the side walls. As a football stadium, some seat locations are close to the action, and other times, far from it. To overcome that, Swan-Badgero does an excellent job of creating the illusion that the actors are focused on each audience member. He also has actors gracefully roll out and retrieve versatile set pieces he designed — often in perfect unison.

Quality costumes designed by Camara Lewis — with some help from Riverwalk's Costume Shop — feature dresses and suits that suit the musical's time hopping between the '20s and '40s.

Hopping into a new season with an ambitious musical at a new venue would stifle a novice, but it appears Peppermint Creek succeeded in making their own tough act to follow.