

Family, music and dysfunction

Peppermint Creek's 'Falsettos' wows with sound

By [Tom Helma](#), Nov. 9 2017

First, there is the quiet. One notices Jeff Boerger's abstract cathedral set. Columns, six of them, and boxes. Pastel colors.

Overall? Soothing. The conductor lifts a hand. A flutist is poised like a bird about to sing; the audience is silent with anticipation.

Suddenly, three men and a boy explode onto the stage with a — “What?” They look like Bedouins, but no, the song is “Four Jews in a Room Bitching.”

The juxtaposition of this serene and peaceful set with the oppositional razzmatazz of the

feverous, dervish-like opening dance is accompanied by a threeman thunderstorm of riotous, agitated, klezmeresque musicians who play nonstop for the duration of the play. Phew!

Yes, this is a musical, driven by the hot hands of multi-talented John Dale Smith, along with Tim Thelen handling percussion and Bronnie Brown on woodwinds — three of them, a flute, a clarinet and a saxophone.

Like many musicals, this is a love story of losses and a family's reconciliation after these losses. A husband cheats; a wife is aggrieved. What seems unique about this? Well, the husband's love interest is a guy — not quite as shocking now as when the play was first performed in the late 1970s.

Written and first performed in New York in 1977 and '81, “Falsettos” is two short, sequentially-linked stories merged together. Peppermint Creek's Theatre Co.'s rendition comes on the heels of a Broadway revival. It brings back a time not so long ago when homosexuality was not quite as well accepted as now — and not in a Jewish family. You can almost hear an incredulous, “How could this happen?” And you can almost see the stereotypical shrug.

“Falsettos” comes alive with long, well-articulated musical narratives, a nuclear family fragmented by divorce, a singing psychotherapist who falls for his client, the divorcing woman and a precocious man-child who charms the hell out of the audience. In the midst of betrayals, rejections and multiple disconnects — one man collapses, and we are suddenly reminded of the early days of the AIDS epidemic. The audience hushes as the first love song is sung, a man singing it to a man. They kiss.

The kiss is a statement. How does a gay male find himself feeling when he first sees himself represented on stage by a simple kiss, man to man?



This is an ensemble cast of singers who can act as well as sing. Chief among equals is Matt Eldred in the role of married father Marvin whose voice threads lyrically in his upper tenor range while vibrating with a baritone rumbling when he goes low.

Eldred is at his best near the end of act one where he sings tenderly to his son, Jason, a number simply labelled “Father and Son.”

Marvin is married to Trina, Leah Gerstel, whose powerful singing voice is matched with great stage animation. This is especially so in “I’m Breaking Down,” a moment of singing and dancing bravado that brought the house down with applause.

In between the distressed couple is their engaging son Jason, who performs to perfection by Phineas Reed. He’s cute, curious, non-judgmental and diminutive — holds his own quite well with seasoned adult actors.

Joe Quick is “Whizzer,” gay and casual and uncomplicated. Quick inhabits this role well, adding a depth to his character — especially as Whizzer slowly descends into illness and death.

The first act cast is joined in Act II by lesbian couple Cordelia and Doctor Charlotte, Sarah Lynn and Maggie Smith, who add substantial powerful singing voices in featured roles.

There are over 40 song and dance numbers in “Falsettos,” all of which were performed with great choreographed ease. Kudos to dance master Karyn Perry.

“Falsettos” is a lengthy play taking a long time to unfold a complex story, yet well worth the time to experience.

“Falsetto” Thursday, Nov. 2-Sunday, Nov. 5; Thursday, Nov. 9-Sunday, Nov.12 \$20/\$15 Students and Seniors 65+ Center Miller Performing Arts 6025 Curry Lane Lansing peppermintcreek.org.