

Ohio Light Opera: *The Fantasticks* (July 14)

by Peter Feher



The Ohio Light Opera made a smart move adding *The Fantasticks* to its repertory this season. The company that puts operetta first but always has room for a musical or two couldn't have chosen a better classic for this strange summer back from the pandemic. This is a show that needs only a barebones setup, and OLO's production (which ran from July 14–24, outdoors at Wayne Center for the Arts in Wooster) was charmingly stripped down.

Now, there's some risk involved in keeping things so simple. *The Fantasticks*, which opened off-Broadway in 1960 and stayed there for 17,000-plus performances, can

quickly turn amateur in the hands of a local theater or high school (and that's even some of its appeal).

Fortunately, you're unlikely to hear a better-sung production than this one. (Wilson Southerland did the music direction and was the one-man pit orchestra on keyboard for Harvey Schmidt's score.) By the end of the Overture, the cast and the set were assembled — a paint-splattered sheet as backdrop, a handful of props plucked from a trunk onstage — ready for the music and story proper.



As El Gallo, baritone Mark Hosseini had a tricky line to walk as both narrator and villain. He handled the pressure of the famous opening tune, “Try to Remember,” with the sort of precision you might expect of an art song. That same carefulness meant the character's antagonist turn — the flamenco singing in “It Depends on What You Pay,” as he plans the story's central abduction — stopped short of truly wild.

The lovers at the heart of El Gallo's plot came across with the right mix of naivety, arrogance, and sympathy. Elizabeth Stockton Perkins, on as the Luisa understudy for the July 14 performance, admirably avoided that classic soprano pitfall — playing annoying — and kept the character's whoops and high notes within the realm of likable. Spencer

Resse as Matt — the boy who knows he's in love because he's normally so smart but acting so stupid — sang the tenor's gamut from romantic to clueless to hopeful.



Some of the fun of *The Fantasticks* is young people getting to play young. More of the fun, in many productions, is young people playing old. And Tom Jones's libretto, drawn from an 1894 play (*Les Romanesques*), is always toying with which generation looks more foolish.

Benjamin Krumreig and Michelle Pedersen were the parents (normally two fathers, here a father and a mother) who keep up a mock feud à la *Romeo and Juliet* to trick their children into falling in love. Both parts are appropriately one-note, though Pedersen made the most of the bit with the gumption of a character actress.

The other old people are a pair of traveling actors, recruited for El Gallo's scheme and stumbling onto the stage from under the backdrop (a nice touch to Steven Daigle's direction). Vince Gover as Henry and Adam Wells as Mortimer approached their slapstick roles gamely, but this is really where the balance shifts from music to theater. Henry offers to (mis)quote some Shakespeare, spelling out the baldly theatrical conventions structuring the show.

But these stock gestures are also part of what makes *The Fantasticks* work. There's a sense of figuring things out with Schmidt and Jones' musical — the way characters self-consciously slot into archetypes, or how a couple of classic poetic images (the sun and the moon, a piece of fruit) thread through the whole thing. The “do it yourself” spirit of the show makes a simple production all the more effective.



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