

**Ohio Light Opera:
The Fantasticks (July 19)**

by Daniel Hathaway



The Fantasticks travels lightly, but it's traveled a great distance since Harvey Schmidt and Tom Jones adapted *Les Romanesques*, an 1894 play by Edmond Rostand, into a 1960 hit. The show opened in May of that year and ran off-Broadway for 42 years and over 17,000 performances.

It's a boy-meets-girl tale simply and poignantly told

along the lines of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* (or e.e. cummings' *anyone lived in a pretty how town*) by a troupe of traveling actors who begin by unpacking everything they need to tell the story from a trunk.

And the story? Matt's father Hucklebee (James Mitchell) and Luisa's mother Bellomy (Jolle LaChance) guarantee that their children will fall in love by pretending to feud and building a wall between their houses to prevent them from meeting, which of course they do. "Why? They did it 'cause we said no."

El Gallo, the emcee and a bandit-for-hire, cooks up a plan to end the feud by having Luisa kidnapped and heroically rescued by Matt, but the plan runs aground when it ends in a duel that El Gallo wins. Innocence turns into experience as El Gallo introduces more doses of reality into the adventures of the young lovers, necessarily wounding them in order to save them. The show ends with Luisa and Matt together, older but wiser, and the parents once again separated by a wall on the principle that "good fences make good neighbors."



Although its musical forces have changed over time (the show was originally scored for harp and piano), the simplicity and directness of its songs remains its main source of charm. Such tunes as “Try to Remember (the Kind of September)” and “Soon it’s Gonna Rain” are sentimental and affecting and stick in the memory. Humorous but wise songs like “Never Say No” and “Plant a Radish (Get a Radish)” dispense eternal truths in the form of kernels of wisdom.

Sadie Spivey, who was such an impressive Mable in *Pirates of Penzance*, stood out again here as Luisa both for her vocal prowess and masterful acting ability. Spencer Reese played a sweet-voiced and affecting Matt (he also choreographed the show). Vincent Gover and Edward Ferran were hilarious as the over-the-hill Shakespearean actor Henry and his sidekick Mortimer, whose specialty is dying onstage. Mark Hosseini, last seen as the Pirate King in *Pirates of Penzance*, was a dashing El Gallo, that unconvincing villain. And if you need to cast the role of a wall — say in your next production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* — look no further than the eloquent Mute, Lily Graham.

Although the original scoring of the show for harp and piano was a little stroke of genius, music director Wilson Sutherland provided brilliant accompaniment for this

version at an electronic keyboard. Just imagine how many harp strings would have snapped in the kind of humidity we experienced on Tuesday afternoon.

Photos by Matt Dilyard from an earlier OLO production.

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