

The Music Man hits a Sour Note

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OF CONTRIBUTOR

The Music Man
Vancouver Playhouse
Through December 19

Musical Theatre (or as I like to call it, Musical Spectacle) is arguably the most popular form of theatre today. At its most basic level it holds all of the key elements of entertainment that appeal to mass audiences—elaborate sets, colourful costumes, catchy songs, and upbeat dance numbers. Some musicals manage to use these components as a foundation on which to create a piece of quality theatre. *The Music Man*, by Meridith Willson, is not one of them.

The Music Man is Harold Hill (Jeff Hyslop, whom you may recognize from *The Phantom of the Opera* about six years ago). Hill is a travelling con-man who sells instruments and uniforms to small communities, claiming he will

conduct a boys' band. He usually manages to skip town with the money before anyone realizes he cannot read a note. However, in River City, Iowa, his plans run amuck as he predictably finds himself falling in love with the local librarian/piano teacher, Marion Paroo (Rebecca Poff).

The main problem with *The Music Man* is Willson's placement of songs. Songs are, obviously, an important part of musicals, but they must be used correctly. At the beginning of a scene a song should give important background information or introduce characters. If a character is singing, he or she should come to some conclusion that will affect the story by the end of the song. In *The Music Man* songs are randomly placed and add little to the story line. For example, when Hill comes to River City he talks to several citizens who make it perfectly clear he is not welcome. They then launch into a lengthy number about how the town is inhospitable to strangers. The song provides no

new information to the story, making it completely irrelevant. Any song that does not affect the plot should be cut. This would make *The Music Man* about half as long and much more enjoyable.

Hyslop and Poff give enthusiastic yet impassionate performances. There is no chemistry between the pair, making their romance unbelievable and boring. Both are outshone by several of the minor characters who provide moments of vitality to the otherwise drab play. Mayor Shinn's (Kevin McNully) and the schoolboard-turned-barber-shop-quartet's mixed aphorisms and petty bantering lighten the mood considerably, as does the mayor's wife Eulalie's (Patti Allan) Grecian urn dance. But these quirky characters do not make up for the uninspired and in parts tedious performances of the leads.

Director Michael Shanata has put together a generic piece of musical spectacle. It is the type of musical that gives the entire genre a bad name.



Jeff Hyslop — enthusiastic yet impassionate performance