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Arts & Theatre



**'CRAZY FOR YOU'
LEAVES AUDIENCES
SPEECHLESS**

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'Crazy for You' leaves the audience speechless

BY MICHELLE GENZ
Staff Writer

There is one seat in the house I wouldn't want to have during the too-short run of "Crazy for You," and it's the seat of whoever's manning the box office. For a show comparable in cast size and production costs to the record-breaking "42nd Street," the

absolutely effervescent "Crazy for You" is only up for three weeks – "42 Street" was extended twice, to five weeks, but that's not an option with "West Side Story" coming up.

Judging by the stunned expressions and speechless smiles of the exiting audience, following a thunderous ovation that had one man down front waving his arm high in the air to the



PHOTOS: BENJAMIN HAGER

music of the final number, whoever sees it is likely to want to go again.

This show, with its dazzling tap dancing to gorgeous Gershwin melodies, is tailor-made for the Vero audience. Add to that a modern wit and excellent cast, and it's sure to draw more than Riverside regulars.

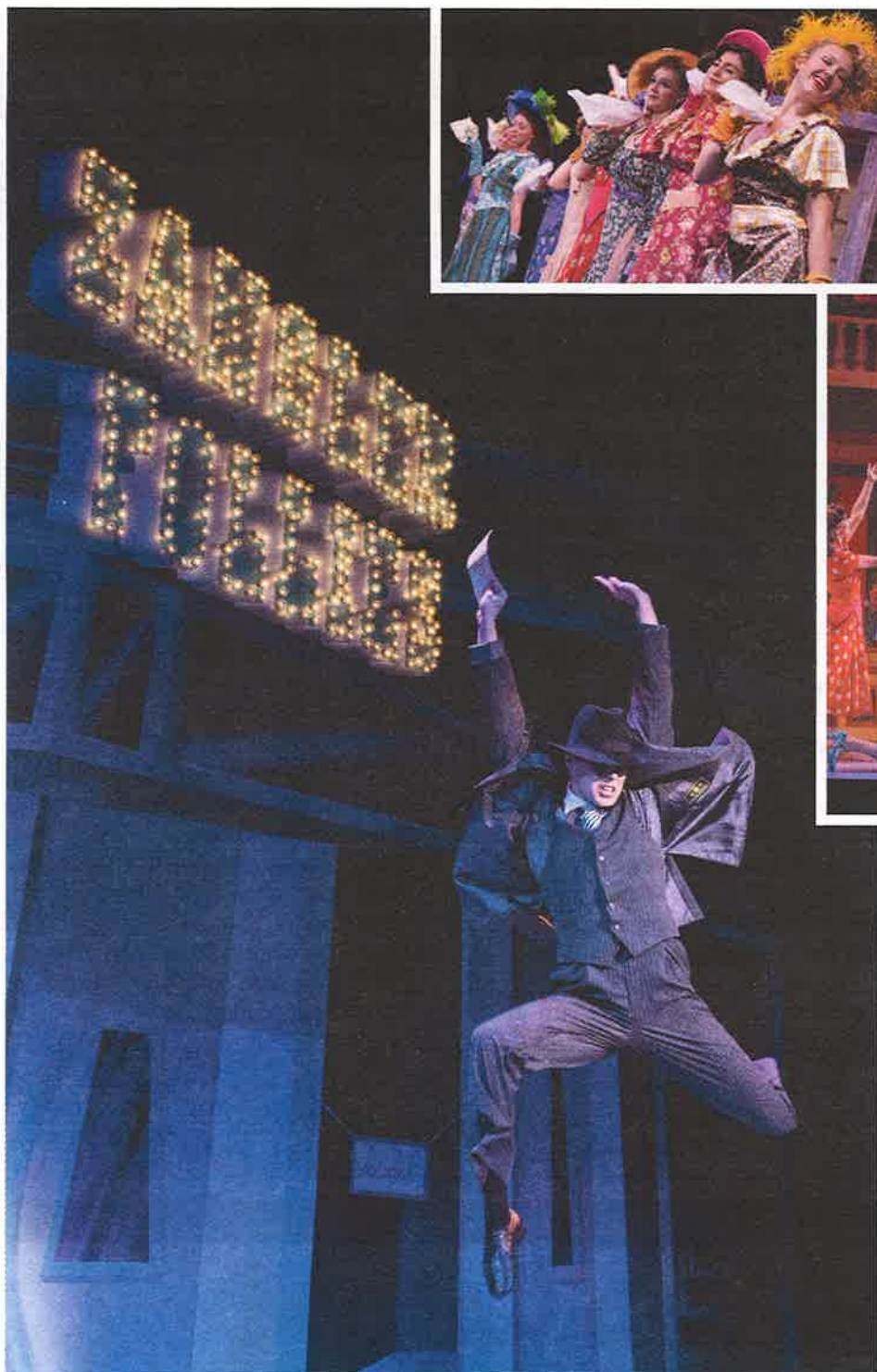
Opening night drew not only patron producers, but high school drama teachers, a dance studio owner,

and at least one 15-year-old St. Edward's School theater student who was laughing so hard she was crying.

Loosely based on the 1930s musical "Girl Crazy," the script was largely rewritten after the Gershwin estate opened its entire catalogue to creator Ken Ludwig and director Michael Ockrent. They used seven songs from the original show and 13 more.

The result is a show that feels

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both contemporary and nostalgic. It doesn't resort to schmaltz; it spoofs it, yet still gets you moony over the tunes of George and Ira Gershwin. From the moment the orchestra in the pit struck up that glorious overture, hearts soared and stayed there, under the spell of Riverside's newly full-time music director Ken Clifton. He worked a miracle reducing the score from 26 musicians to ten.

The old-timey plot is over-the-top ludicrous in a Mel Brooks kind of way, and many of the best gags are delivered with rubber-legged slapstick by the lithe, lyrical tapper Drew Nellesen. His performance is nothing short of a marathon.

To think he and the cast were just getting warmed up at the first-act finale, "I've Got Rhythm," that lasted a full nine minutes.

Lush costuming against lavish sets are in a palette that would make Baz Luhrmann proud.

Nellesen plays Bobby Child, the

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banker's son with the show biz bug. He gets sent to Deadwood, Nevada, to foreclose on a theater. There he falls in love with the theater owner's daughter, Polly, the only girl left in the dismal town. She of course despises Bobby for what he's there to do. But Bobby persists: Impersonating the impresario who refused to give him his big break, he decides to stage a show that will revive the entire town – and get him the girl.

Conveniently, the chorus line of showgirls somehow happens on

Deadwood on a group vacation. They induce the drowsy cowboys to dance like Fred Astaire. Polly falls in love with Bobby's impersonation, but when she wises up to the deception, he goes back to New York. A few just-missed-each-other's later, and wedding bells ring, attended by a couple of hilarious hook-ups on the side.

"Embraceable You," "I've Got Rhythm," "Slap that Bass," and "They Can't Take That Away from Me": the show had to win the Tony for Best Musical in 1992, and Susan Stroman's



choreography won another (she went on to direct "The Producers.")

What made it a winner for me was the fact that, with all this spectacular dancing, staging and singing, the actors actually manage to act. There is clear connection between Nellessen and his leading lady, Abby Church, who played in last season's "I Love a Piano."

James Brennan, who for years has been guest-directing Riverside productions, was just the man to direct this. He played the lead on Broadway and directed a 1999 run at the

Paper Mill Playhouse that was taped for broadcast in PBS's Great Performances series. He went on to stage the show many more times. Deanna Dys, who choreographed the national tour of "Crazy for You" after playing Patsy on Broadway, choreographed Riverside's production.

Set designer Michael Anania designed the Paper Mill Playhouse set; his version for Riverside was executed by in-house scenic artist Dusty Terrell.

"Crazy for You" was a monumental effort, and it paid off. ■