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## **Review: Contra Costa Civic Theatre delivers hilarious ‘La Cage aux Folles’**

By **MEDIANEWS** and **PAT CRAIG**

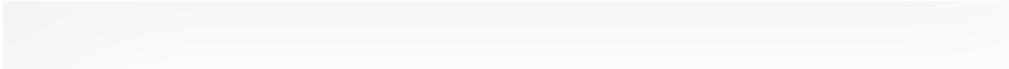
July 7, 2013 at 6:33 am

Much has changed in the gay world since the early 1980s, when Harvey Fierstein and Jerry Herman collaborated to turn Jean Poiret’s play “La Cage aux Folles” into a musical of the same name.

This is most readily illustrated by the song, “I Am What I Am,” which seemed to begin life as a defiant manifesto of liberation. Now, it seems more of an anthem of pride and victory when it is performed by Albin (Peter Del Fiorentino), the star performer at La Cage aux Folles, the French drag club operated by him and his partner, Georges (Dan Kapler) in the Contra Costa Civic Theatre production of the show.

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There are other details — underplayed, really — that pay homage to the way things were 30 years ago, most notably the almost painful lack of public displays of affection between Albin and Georges. But what remains in the musical, and shines bright as ever, is the sweetness and sense of family that becomes the root of the story when Georges' son Jean-Michel (Daniel Quezada) returns home with an announcement.

The home, an apartment above the club, decorated in mid-20th century homoerotica, explodes with joy when Jean-Michel announces he plans to marry the lovely Anne (Melissa Heinrich). That joy turns to panic and disbelief when Jean-Michel tells Albin and Georges that Anne's family will be coming over for dinner soon. And, he adds quickly, her father Edouard Dindon (John Sellen) is a leading candidate for a conservative political party, running on a platform that includes closing all the drag clubs and other sin spots around town.

Not surprisingly, it is an extremely difficult dinner as the gentlemen recount all their differences in the arena of sex. It ends happily, but not without some delightfully timed comedy, which unites the two families in a wild scene that climaxes on the club stage, where everyone, including Edouard, gets into the act.

The acting in the show is terrific throughout. Del Fiorentino and Kapler are excellent as the club-owning couple, and are especially hilarious in a scene where Georges teaches Albin to walk and talk like a man, and the patrons at the cafe, men and women, dive in with masculinity suggestions.

Quezada and Heinrich effectively play the young couple, often the only voices of pure reason on stage. They serve not only to create the romantic interest, but as compelling connection between the two families.

And then there's Sellen, who looks vaguely like Dick Cheney, and Sue Claire Jones, as his long-suffering wife. They are pitch-perfect in their roles and serve as the flame that ignites the frenetic and wildly funny conclusion to the show.

All of this is augmented by a fine supporting cast, including a crew of drag performers who surround Albin's Zaza stage character, creating some amazingly well-performed drag show moments reminiscent of San Francisco's posh Broadway drag night club Finocchio's, which closed in 1999 following a run that began in 1936.

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'LA CAGE AUX FOLLES'

By Jerry Herman and Harvey Fierstein, presented by Contra Costa Civic Theatre

Through: July 21

Where: Contra Costa Civic Theatre, 951 Pomona Ave., El Cerrito

Running time: 2 hours, 30 minutes

Tickets: \$16.50-\$28.50, 510-524-9132 or [www.ccct.org](http://www.ccct.org)

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