

Regional Reviews: San Jose/Silicon Valley

Singin' in the Rain South Bay Musical Theatre

Review by **Eddie Reynolds**

I am a sucker for tap-dancing, especially when a stage is packed to the gills with smiling, arm-swinging tappers who are uniformly toe-heel clicking up a storm and singing at the same time in full, fine voice. For that reason alone, I can heartily recommend grabbing a ticket for South Bay Musical Theatre's upbeat, well-performed *Singin' in the Rain*, the 1980s stage version of the ever-popular 1952 film that almost any movie fan on earth loves to love and has probably seen multiple times. The fact that this cast of thirty can not only tap but keep us laughing during many screwball comedic moments, swaying to familiar songs, and rooting for the happy, romantic ending we know is coming—all that only means an evening at the Saratoga Civic Theatre is going to be a well-worth taking trip down memory lane.

The original film's Betty Comden/Adolph Green authored story (with music by Nacio Herb Brown and lyrics by Arthur Freed) first came to the stage largely intact in a 1983 West End production, followed by a New York bow in 1985. A promised 2017 revival on the Great White Way was unfortunately shelved, making SBMT's decision to stage the musical a great chance to see a well-loved film come to full life on the stage.

As most audience members may know, the scene is Hollywood on the cusp of silent movies dying a sudden death in 1927 with the premiere of *The Jazz Singer*, the first movie with sound. Silent star duo Don Lockwood and Lina Lamont as well as their riding-high studio, Monumental Pictures, are suddenly potential Model T's in a world of snazzy coupe models. Their futures and that of R.F. Simpson, the studio's movie mogul, are in dire jeopardy. That is especially true because starlet Lina has a voice akin to that of a cartoon character.

Don, who in no way loves Lina the way the Hollywood rags thinks he does, has met Kathy Seldon, an aspiring actress, on a park bench, and even though their first sparks are a bit caustic, the flames for each other have been



**Michael Saenz, Nathaniel Rothrock,
and Melissa Momboisse**

Photo by Dave Lepori

ignited. When the studio decides an upcoming silent movie needs to become a full-blown musical, Don and his boyhood chum Cosmo Brown convince R.F. and Kathy to have her dub her beautiful spoken and sung vocals for those of Lina—hopefully without the hot-blooded, highly jealous, and ego-inflated Lina having a clue until the movie's opening night. As everyone knows, Lina does find out, leading to all-out war on stage.

As Don, Nathaniel Rothrock reincarnates enough of Gene Kelly's smooth pizzazz to receive high kudos for the ease with which he taps, glides, soft shoes, and generally dances with style. Where his Don excels even more is in each of the ten or so songs his voice has a chance to sell, sell, sell the lines sung. From his first melodious solo, "You Stepped Out of a Dream" to his final notes in "You Are My Lucky Star," Nathaniel Rothrock croons with the romantically smooth sounds one remembers from the greats of the big screen's 1930s, '40s, and '50s. But when we hear that first "Doo-dloo-doo-doo" sung with sparkle and spring in his vocals, we lean forward for the Act One, much-anticipated finale of the title song that in no way disappoints and only thrills us. Once again, Rothrock wows us with both song and his ability to trip the light fantastic while tapping merrily through the rain.

When Don is joined by his pal Cosmo Brown (Michael Saenz) in numbers like "Fit as a Fiddle" and "Moses
Menu oses," the two are a perfectly paired comedy and song-and-dance duo, tapping wildly in synchronized moves /ing not only feet, but seemingly every other part of their bodies in constant, rapid motion. The synergy between the two is contagious, bringing the audience to life with appreciative applause.

Each time Michael Saenz is on the stage as Cosmo, he is nothing less than terrific. The comic flair he brings to a number like "Make 'em Laugh" must be seen truly to appreciate. As he narrowly dodges stage workers with their swinging planks of wood or racks of costumes, he is also kicking high, flopping up on a pole only to be carried away by workers, or stage dancing and mimicking making love to a stuffed dummy. When he envisions a movie that includes dancing as well as singing, his "Gotta Dance" is a near showstopper as seventeen others join him on stage in various combinations on two levels in a frenzy of rapid-fire tapping. On top of all his clownish antics and dancing prowess, he sings with a voice fully vibrant and vivacious.

While Lina's star is falling on the silver screen as the musical progresses, Melissa Jones' star shines with glee as her Lina squeaks, scratches, shrieks, and even screams in high pitch as she attempts to go from the silents to the talkies. When she sings—ok, not sings, but squawks—"What's Wrong with Me?" and four debonair guys in tuxes emerge from a costume rack to swirl around her adoringly, Melissa Jones delivers one of the night's funniest of many funny moments.

Melissa Momboisse's Kathy Selden sings with a voice that pleasantly pleases in numbers like "You Are My Lucky Star." Putting on her dancing shoes, she truly impresses. Momboisse is a great partner, both when gliding around with Rothrock or when part of the perky trio, "Good Morning," with Rothrock and Saenz—a number where the rapidity and exactness of their three sets of tapping feet are matched by the comic ways they dance using trench coats or by the three stepping up on a couch only to tip it over, landing a perfect finale on the floor.

As both director and choreographer, Lee Ann Payne deserves huge applause and appreciation for dancing numbers big and small that all appear near flawless and for many decisions that add to the comic aspects of this delightful song-and-dance show. One example of the latter is placing on the side a hilarious trio of furiously-note-taking film assistants (Rhonda McFadyen, Peter Bullen, and Sophia Davis) who sound like mocking parrots to every order the movie director Roscoe Dexter (Michael Paul Hirsch) blurts in military command mode.

Among this large cast, almost everyone has a few minutes to step out of the ensemble and take a turn at producing hilarity. Unable to name all, I do want to give a shout out to Stephen Sammonds as Monumental Pictures' big boss R.F. Simpson, Sara K. Dean as Hollywood star-interviewer Dora Bailey, and Jackson Paddock who intones "Beautiful Girl" with a sweet tenor voice while six beauties do a film-musical walk-around with their feathered boas.

Much of the evening's fun comes from the 1920s outfits the cast members get to wear, ranging from flapper fringe to pink-feathered frills to sparkling evening gowns as seen in the Hollywood of old. Congratulations to Courtney Kendall for scoring a hit with her scores of costume wonders. More hilarity spawns from the clever, laugh-out-loud, silent film clips produced in projections by Chris Beer and Sara K. Dean (including home films supposedly of Don and Cosmo when they were kids performing together).

The capstone to all the good times of South Bay Musical Theatre's winning *Singin' in the Rain* is the stage-filling finale of the title song's reprise, a big-sounding and well-choreographed number sure to have everyone leaving the theatre singing in their own heads:

"I've a smile on my face.
I'll walk down the lane
With a happy refrain,
Just singin', singin' in the rain."

Singin' in the Rain runs through June 3, 2023, at South Bay Musical Theatre, Saratoga Civic Theatre, 13777 Fruitvale Avenue, Saratoga CA. Please note: All patrons must wear well-fitting masks inside the theatre. For tickets and information, please visit southbaymt.com.



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