
‘Street Scene’ – The American Experience

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Seduction, betrayal, and murder resonated throughout the walls of Civic Arts’ Scherr Forum Theatre on Sunday afternoon as the Musical Theatre Guild’s cast of thirty Equity performers told a story that would stick with audience members long after the curtain closed.

Behind the façade of a decaying brownstone, a melting pot of Irish Catholics and Polish Jews, Italian and Swedish immigrants, as well as laborers and vagrants, and women and children all amalgamate, swelter, and boil in their own corrupt humanity. Based on Elmer Rice’s Pulitzer Prize-winning play, “Street Scene” combines Kurt Weill’s penetrating score with Langston Hughes’ poignant lyrics to highlight the seedy street life that drives society’s core.

“It is interesting, because it is still very timely what people argue about today – being true to their own kind,” said Musical Theatre Guild founding member, as well as the role of Mrs. Olga Olsen, Kathryn Skatula. “It doesn’t change; it still goes on; whoever got here first wants to be the one in power.”

From its casual, slow-paced opening to the chaotic confusion that brings down the final curtain, “Street Scene” never strays far from the truth about Rice’s slice of the American experience. While the explosive plot is predictable, “Street Scene” comprises an overpowering charisma derived from its talented characters.

“I had to take a huge cast and cut it down to the essentials,” said Director Calvin Remsberg.

The capable Danny Gurwin plays Sam Kaplan, a young Jewish college lad in love with the Irish Rose Marraunt. He sets a high standard for the show’s vocals with his full, rich sound that masters as much in its belting as it does in its pianissimo.

As for the female singers, while brilliant actors, they seem to struggle to balance their musical theater tendencies with Weill’s specific operatic sound.

Christina Saffron Ashford displays great acting skill in the role of Rose, a naïve and petite working girl, conveying the simple helplessness her character requires. Meanwhile, Eileen Barnett is efficient as the doomed, adulterous mother of Rose. Her sustained high notes led audiences to gasp in disbelief at the sheer strength of her vocal chords.

“On the actual score it is called a ‘dramatic musical,’ and that has always been the argument – Is it an opera? Is it a musical? Is it a play with music?” said Skatula.

“It was a milestone in American musical theatre, because it was the first time that negro spirituals, gospel, opera – all types of music were put into one play,” said Remsberg.

“Street Scene” displays a rather unusual combination of musical styles and idioms, with influences ranging from the idioms of Harlem nightclubs to legato lines of nineteenth-century opera. Songs vary from the Puccini-like soprano aria, “Somehow I Never Could Believe,” to the Broadway-style jitterbug dance routine, “Moon-Faced, Starry Eyed.”

“It’s a show that is very rarely done, so I think the audience should look at it as a rare opportunity to hear music rarely performed,” said Remsberg.

Just as the line blurs between opera and musical comedy, the plot aims to both confuse and enlighten. With the combination of this high-energy material and these high-level performers, the Musical Theatre Guild’s production of “Street Scene” opened eyes and brought audiences to their feet in a standing ovation.