



## MARK HUGHES COBB: Theater scene boasts top talent

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Unless you got down to Gulf Shores this summer and caught the University of Alabama's SummerTide version of the off-Broadway musical-comedy hit compiled by Roger Bean -- landing the rights alone must have been a Herculean labor -- "The Marvelous Wonderettes" should come as a pleasant surprise.

All four of its stars are undergrads in UA's musical theater program. Not so long ago, that might have drawn an "And?", but in the past dozen years, UA's built an outstanding program that frequently sends triple-threat graduates into top professional work. Michael Luwoye joined the cast of mega-hit "Hamilton." Also on Broadway is his classmate Nick Burroughs, who's in the musical hit "Kinky Boots." Jake Boyd went out on the national tour of "Oklahoma," played Broadway in "Rock of Ages" and recently finished a long stint as Fiyero in the touring company of "Wicked." And that's just a few. So by even making it into that competitive program, the lineup tells you something: It's a pro show.

It's Theatre Tuscaloosa's opener to the 2016-17 season, one that takes on weight as it merrily rolls along. For the holidays, Theatre Tuscaloosa finds its way back to "A Christmas Carol," which it hasn't performed since 1992. You might have heard the story. It's got ghosts. In February, there's a revisit to Haleyville playwright Brad Bailey's "The Real Queen of Hearts Ain't Even Pretty," a 1970s-set comedy that got good reviews in Los Angeles, including in industry bible Variety. Drew Baker will direct; she performed in the original production, 35 years back.

Paul K. Looney, artistic director emeritus, will direct his swan song with the company, appropriately Stephen Sondheim's "Company," which was his first show with the group he lead to become Theatre Tuscaloosa. Somewhat like "Godfather 3," though Looney technically retired some years back, he's pulled back in from time to time, especially to direct his specialty, big musicals. This closer, 35 years after Looney's first "Company," is a dark comedy wrapped around conflicted bachelor Bobby, on his 35th birthday pondering any future love life, guided by an odd group of friends.

Then the 2017 summer musical will be the epic "Ragtime," which can require 60 or more performers. When UA did it back in 2004, the cast came in from several counties, and wound up dressing all over Rowand-Johnson. Though backstage and underneath there was sprawling mess, but on stage it came together, glorious. Sometimes the effort needn't show.

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