

## LOCAL &amp; REGION

## THEATER REVIEW

## Musical showcases UA's strengths

By Mark Hughes Cobb  
Staff Writer

"Show Boat" might well have been retitled "Showcase," for the production at the University of Alabama. It's kind of a greatest hits collection of some of the Department of Theatre and Dance's finest, supported by a couple of old friends, no strangers to the Marian Galloway Theatre.

It's an apt choice for UA, which has been focusing more on musical theater in the past decade, to stage the Hammerstein and Kern piece that reinvented the style, a drama with music as an integral element rather than a series of songs and dances strung together via a flimsy premise, as was the norm before "Show Boat" debuted in 1927.

As a swan song, it's got enough pathos and melancholy, along with a show-will-go-on feeling — old man river keeps rollin' — to underscore the fact that this is the last UA show to be directed by Edmond Williams, the man who founded the department in the 1970s. He might have preferred to end with something weightier, some Ibsen, Stoppard or his beloved Tennessee Williams, but it's a testament to how lightly the decades have weighed on the founder that his crisp, colorful direction of this better-than-memory musical showcases how he's rolled with the time and tides.

It's better than memory for those who missed late-20th century revivals, from which

**'SHOWBOAT'**

■ **What:** Hammerstein and Kern musical, performed by University of Alabama Department of Theatre and Dance

■ **When:** 7:30 p.m. today through Saturday, closing with a 2 p.m. matinee Sunday

■ **Where:** Marian Galloway Theatre, Rowand-Johnson Hall on the UA campus

■ **Cost:** Tickets \$18 general admission, \$15 seniors and UA faculty and staff, \$12 for students and children.

■ **More:** [www.ua.tix.com](http://www.ua.tix.com). 205-348-3400.

this production seems to be derived, with a streamlined book (the original ran more than 4½ hours in preview, just over 3 on Broadway, but this production clocks in at a tight 2 hours and 15 minutes, not counting intermission) spanning issues of class, love, miscegenation and the vast indifference of nature — fate, God, the universe — to the relatively tiny, flickering lives of mankind.

And how nice to note that many seeing this show will have to Google "miscegenation," a word and concept thankfully almost forgotten today, as we have, on many levels anyway, realized that what consenting adults do with their love is no business of the law.

The score is noteworthy not just for hummable melodies — it is Hammerstein, after all — but for a subtle invocation of how the mixing of races not only didn't spell the downfall of a still-young country, but in fact

strengthened it, as shown when Queenie (a vivid and engaging Rachel Baber) and Joe (Michael Luwoye, superbly powerful and evocative in "Old Man River" and its reprises) presage the music of the 20th century by kicking "Can't Helping Loving That Man of Mine" into higher gear, from operatic pop to danceable blues. The open-hearted spirit of the Cotton Blossom (the show boat) lets Julie (Bridget Winder, making fine use of a wider, warmer and deeper range than even just a few shows back) and her protege Magnolia (a sweetly charming Jessica May) in on the fun; it takes blended metals to make steel.

Working from a clever set by Andy Fitch that, of necessity, has to represent the Cotton Blossom, a nightclub, river walk and various other settings with just a few gliding changes, the show could risk becoming presentational on what is essentially a flat space.

But the easy comedy, high energy, sterling vocal deliveries and fleet, athletic and yet period-appropriate dances choreographed by Stacy Alley bring the show forward.

Two comedic pairs stand out, one from the more experienced end of the stage, the other so bright and assured you'd think they were born and raised there. As the mean-spirited Parthy, Dianne Teague risks becoming the shrew of the show, but she flaunts it with such relish that you can't hate her. Just the opposite in fact: You look forward to every reaction. Charles Prosser charms

as her long-suffering husband Cap'n Andy, but gets to bust loose from time to time, showing why he's the captain. It's a terrific pairing of veterans.

The other funny team is that of a hilariously high-maintenance Frank Schultz, played with lightning timing by Corey Rives, and his smarter, better half Ellie, a witty, warm and vivacious Kelly Barberito. True triple threats, they deliver the shows within the show so tautly that you'd almost forgive if they didn't have the comic interplay elsewhere. But they've got it all.

Adam Vanek is perhaps a little sweet to play the roguish Gaylord Ravenal, but that may be a function of the book, and his lovely voice redeems all. Chris Harding has some striking early moments as Julie's leading man Steve, although like Julie herself, he disappears too soon. Winder does at least get to come back for a terrific, torchy "Bill," in Julie's moment of noble sacrifice (which begs the question why Julie couldn't be brought back to the Cotton Blossom for the happy ending. Ah, melancholy).

In a show full of superior singer-actor-dancers, to name the best would be to run down the entire cast list, but special note must be made for the Kims of three ages: winsome scene-stealer Evy Alley, bright-eyed and high-stepping Margaret Carr and finally, as the grown Broadway star, Tara Lynn Steele, in what would be called a star-making role in any other show not so already dazzling in its firmament.