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REVIEW: Musical hums along like a finely-tuned machine

University of Alabama's production of "42nd Street" is all that jazz and more

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"42nd Street" traveled to Mobile last week, before it opened in Tuscaloosa. Previous University of Alabama musicals "Big River" and "Showboat" visited Montgomery and Mobile, respectively. Last year's snarky "Urinetown" didn't leave town.

When shipping ambassadors to a strange land — to not only garner future students, but followers, donors — you send Mr. Rogers, Harry Belafonte or Audrey Hepburn, not Sarah Silverman, Tom Waits or Richard Pryor. You take time-honored, crowd-cheering choices, and "42nd Street" is all that jazz and more.

It's based on what seems the oldest show-biz trope, the tiny kid with the big dream diving, chained and casketed like Houdini, into a ninja-shark-infested pool, fighting the odds with charm, moxie and The Force, overcoming rising conflict to soar up triumphant on Esther Williams' glistening shoulders. Cue fireworks and fanfare.

It's every "You're going out there a youngster, but you've got to come back a star!," literally, because that line is here, spoken about as un-ironically as it can be given a young cast and crew staging a 1930s-style show in 2015. Believers all, the dozens — metaphor for all sentient beings harboring a wacky dream — of crazy legs shine, tap and razzle-dazzle the stage into joyous submission.

What does it mean? Nothing you haven't seen on a "Hang in there!" kitty poster or Facebook meme, something something dreams something something happiness. "42nd Street" doesn't just ignore the fact that its audience lives in Realityville, not Fantasyland, it Godzilla-style obliterates cares and woes via relentless song and dance. Superman asks you to believe a man can fly; "42nd Street" shows you chorus kids taking flight. The pure fantasy of the lullaby of Broadway eases us to sleep, perchance to dream of songbirds, severed from gravity and paychecks and broken hearts, delirious as that "room without a roof," nothing blocking you from the stars.

To say director and choreographer Stacy Alley's "42nd Street" succeeds on all levels — from leads to back-row chorus, moving in sync as if by soul magic — is not to say it's the greatest thing ever. It's just the greatest pretty, lively, driven, uplifting goof



Photo | Kirsten Fiscus

The cast of "42nd Street" rehearses at Rowand-Johnson Hall on the campus of the University of Alabama.

you're likely to see in a couple hours on a stage.

UA senior Tara Lynn Steele has grown into leading roles, from standout smaller parts, so it's fitting she's the emblem of the show as Broadway baby Peggy Sawyer. Before UA began expanding its musical-theater side about a dozen years ago, adding faculty member Raphael Crystal, music director and conductor of the orchestra here, musicals had to work around skill sets. An actor might sing, but not be able to dance; someone from the dance department might carry a tune, but had little to no experience with text and subtext.

Now UA recruits and develops triple-threat kids like Steele who can do it all, with the seemingly effortless flash and pizzazz found on Broadway. Some day, maybe soon, she should be.

Add to that all of the cast, but especially hilarious and touching Chelsea Reynolds as fading star Dorothy; the just-dark-enough-for-this-show Chris Bellinger, as director Julian; Daniel Velasquez as charming-sweet tenor Billy; Carrie Poh as brassy broad-writer Maggie; Bill Martin as effusive Bert; William D. Rowling as Dorothy's stolid love Pat; Corey Rives as almost comically limber and whip-fast choreographer Andy; Charles Prosser as sleazy money man Abner; Scarlett Walker as salacious Anytime Annie; Kiley Gipson, Kelly Barberito, Matt Gabbard, Mary Catherine Waltman, Leah Nicoll, Bailey Marica and the whole ensemble. This is a smooth machine with neatly fitted parts.

Aside from Alley, other UA faculty stepped up: Costumer Donna Meester polished dazzling textures and tones, making even off-stage wear suggest a happier, more aesthetically giddy era. Andy Fitch built a nimble, relatively light set that transforms from backstage to stage to offstage with grace and style. His scrimms, with smart lighting by Edward Pottoroff, provide playground for theatrical gags; the design supports without stealing focus, much like a chorus.

Alley's crafted gems of works such as "Urinetown" and "Chicago," making prime use of the Gallaway, and seeing the best in UA's deep well of talent, so while it's not a surprise "42nd Street" is triumphant, it is a step forward. More cynical narratives play easily on an Internet-savvy, irony-first populace; far from the cliff's edge of sentiment, there's ample ground to stand.

"42nd Street" leaps, ingenue-eyes-wide, bravely taking chances to be young — and a little bit dumb — again. Because no matter how cynical our world grows, that musical-theater kid up there may have been a bit of an oddball growing up, misunderstood or even mistreated, feeling lost until he or she directed feet to the sunny side of a stage. And if those crazy kids can beam this phantasm into our weary world, who knows what dreams might awake?

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