

Published Oct 1, 2008

Review: 'Radio Hour' makes audience part of show

The fearless Department of Theatre and Dance at Southeast Missouri State University has mounted another successful and entertaining musical. This time it's "The 1940s Radio Hour," written by Walton James and directed and choreographed by Dennis Courtney.

Imagine it's Christmas 1942, America's at war, and radio is king. Now imagine you've got tickets to see a live performance of the Mutual Manhattan Variety Cavalcade radio show. There will be a live band with singing, dancing and comedy skits. With the added excitement of the behind-the-scenes look at the wild and harried goings on of putting on a live radio show, grand entertainment just doesn't get any better.

Visiting director Dennis Courtney, based in New York, has assembled a talented cast and has not held back on the ambitious song and dance numbers. It was quite impressive to watch more than 20 performers on the stage at the same time doing 20 different things. Throw in a solid music performance from a live band, fast paced singing and dancing to intricate choreography, and the audience can't help but to feel part of the action.

"The 1940s Radio Hour" is a musical comedy set on the sound stage of WVO, a radio station that produces a weekly variety show of live music, song and comedy. The play begins as the doorman and stage manager start prepping the stage for the night's performance. One by one, crew and performers arrive for the performance and are introduced. We get to know a little about each character with each introduction — who they're seeing, what their dreams are. As the time of performance nears the pace gets frantic and you're swept up with the "live" aspect of the show.

In fact, the audience itself becomes part of the show. As the "radio show" is about to start the cast begins interacting with actual audience members. We, the audience, suddenly become the real audience for the variety show and is encouraged to applaud when the "applaud" sign lights up. In a nice twist, the singers sing not only for the radio but for us.

The live band on stage does a good job of keeping up with the performers while laying down a toe-tapping groove.

Courtney, obviously, deserves a lot of credit, but what really impressed this reviewer was the quality and quantity of the talent onstage. It says quite a bit about the theater and dance department to have such a deep pool of talent. All of the cast and crew deserve high praise for mounting and succeeding with a show this ambitious. On the production side, the set design by Jeffrey Luetkenhaus doesn't get any better, and the costumes by Rhonda Weller-Stilson were perfect.

Of course most all of the performances were wonderful, but special mention should go to Andrew Tebo, who played the station manager, Clifton A. Feddington. Tebo has a firm presence on stage and was a good fit for being the center of attention.

Right along with Tebo was Andrew Kruep, who plays Lou Cohn, the stage manager/sound effects man. Kruep kept us clapping at the right time and kept us laughing with his homemade sound effects. Like Tebo, Kruep easily draws the audience's attention.

Julie Mayer, who plays Ginger Brooks, was also spot-on. Mayer can sing, dance, tap dance and be cute as a button all at the same time. Mixing her physical talent with a ditsy personality was both endearing and hilarious.

Cody Heuer, who plays B.J. Gibson, seemed to be Mayer's male counterpart. His aw-shucks college boy personality mixed with his obvious talent was infectious. **"The 1940s Radio Hour"**

"The 1940s Radio Hour" Oct. 1-5



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