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Charlie Huisking

'Hedwig' deserves a rousing reception

I loved "Hedwig and the Angry Inch," the provocative, riotously funny and deeply moving show now onstage at the Gompertz Theatre.

But my enjoyment on opening night was tempered by my concern for the white-haired man in the row in front of me. Every time the show's punk-rock band began to play, he covered his ears with his hands and grimaced as if he'd been shot. I feared he was on the verge of a heart attack.

"Hedwig and the Angry Inch" is part of Florida Studio Theatre's "Stage 3" series, which is designed for audiences seeking edgy, contemporary fare.

But even those "adventurous" subscribers are primarily of retirement age. And loud, bracing rock music, particularly when delivered by the show's transsexual title character, is apparently too edgy for some of them.

In her rave review last week, Herald-Tribune theater critic Susan Rife said the audience at the matinee she attended "could hardly have been less appreciative."

That's a shame, because David Colbert gives a mesmerizing performance as Hedwig, the "internationally ignored song stylist" who is yearning for love and a sense of self.

But even though audience members have been reserved, most are enjoying the show, said FST artistic director Richard Hopkins.

"A few people have grumbled, but I've never stood in the lobby and had so many people thank me profusely for doing a play," Hopkins said. "I'd had second thoughts before we opened. I wondered if I should have done this show as a stand-alone (out of the subscription series), so it could get a special audience.

"But this audience, even if they don't all get it, if it's not about their generation, they still appreciate it. We go to the theater to understand the world a little better. And they're saying, 'This may not be my core culture, but it's somebody else's, and boy, isn't it interesting.'"

Hopkins praised Colbert for the "extraordinary job" he is doing. "It would have been easy to bail on this audience and say, 'They're not getting it, so I'm not going to put out,'" Hopkins said. "But David has found a way to work this audience. He's been phenomenal."

Colbert has performed the role in front of much livelier audiences in several previous productions.

"I've never done it with an audience that's predominantly of one demographic, as this one is," he said. "They are standoffish at first, and it's a little hard to get that back-and-forth going. But by the middle of the show, they are coming around, starting to laugh out loud, or to react with a moan if they think a joke is distasteful. They gradually become more comfortable.

"I have felt by the end of every show that most people appreciate what we did. And I've felt I've gotten what I wanted, also. Because I want to feel good, too."

The early performances in the run have been sold out, with most seats filled by subscribers.

Because many subscribers have begun to head north for the summer, tickets are available for most performances this week and next.

Maybe then, the younger people who always complain there's nothing exciting to see on Sarasota stages will give this show the rousing reception it deserves.

Symphony notes

The Florida West Coast Symphony's board has given executive director Joseph Mc-Kenna a new title: president and CEO.

Board chairman Bryan Langton said McKenna's promotion recognizes "the good work he has done over the past five years." Langton said the title change also reflects the fact that McKenna has assumed more day-to-day responsibility at the symphony, with the board serving in more of an advisory capacity.

In other symphony news, Langton said negotiations continue with conductor Leif Bjaland, whose contract expires this summer. "We're ironing out the finer points, and I'd expect we'll be finished in the next few weeks, unless there's a hiccup I'm not aware of," Langton said.

Meanwhile, negotiations on a new master agreement between the symphony and its musicians are also continuing. The current agreement expires this month. McKenna called the discussions "productive and cordial."

Batter up

In another story on Page 1 of this section, I mention that Steve Rothman, director of the Asolo Theatre Company's upcoming baseball-themed show, "Rounding Third," is a passionate fan of the sport.

That passion was kindled in Sarasota, when a young Rothman served as the visiting-team batboy for spring-training games at Payne Park. During one game with the New York Yankees in 1964, he shared the dugout with Mickey Mantle, Roger Maris and Yogi Berra.

Thirty years later, Rothman was a batboy again, this time in a Los Angeles Dodgers regular-season game. By then an L.A. resident, he was one of the winners of a contest who were each allowed to spend one inning serving as batboys.

"I almost had a heart attack, because in my inning, the Dodgers scored five runs, and I was running all over the place," Rothman said. "When one of the players crossed the plate, he was high-fiving everyone. But I was so nervous, I screwed up my high-five."

Contact Charlie Huisking at charlie.huisking@heraldtribune.com.

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