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Sarasota Herald-Tribune (FL)

'Rise and Fall' captures acerbic wit of Lehrer

January 7, 2005
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Many of the songs in "The Rise and Fall of Western Civilization According to Tom Lehrer" date to the 1960s.

But that doesn't mean they've lost their satiric edge. "They're all about the human condition. And we're still dealing with some of the same issues Lehrer was commenting about 30 and 40 years ago," said **Dennis Courtney**, who is directing Florida Studio Theatre's upcoming production of the musical revue.

"The song 'Who's Next?' speculates on which country will be next to get the atomic bomb, for example. And 'National Brotherhood Week' comments about the prejudices that still exist all around us. 'The Vatican Rag' is about the Catholic Church. What could be more topical than that?"

Lehrer began performing his witty, socially conscious material in the 1950s while attending Harvard University.

Surprised by the warm reception he was getting, he self-published his first album, "Songs by Tom Lehrer," which he sold by mail order.

More recordings and concert tours added to his cult status. In 1964, his material was used regularly on NBC's weekly political-satire show, "That Was The Week That Was."

He recorded the best of that material in the album "That Was The Year That Was."



Always a reluctant performer, Lehrer stopped giving regular concerts in the late 1960s. But he was back in the limelight in 1978, when producer Cameron Mackintosh presented a revue of his works, "Tomfoolery," in London.

Today, at 76, Lehrer continues writing. Some of his newer

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material, including "I'm Spending Hanukkah in Santa Monica," is in the FST show.

"Tom Lehrer made no pretension about being politically correct, and that's one of the things I love about his work," Courtney said. "He insults everybody. But he isn't mean-spirited. He does it in such a fun and loving way."

Not all of the songs in the revue are about social issues. "I Hold Your Hand in Mine" is a macabre parody of love ballads. A sample lyric: "My joy would be complete, dear/ If You were only here/ But I still keep your hand/ As a precious souvenir."

In another song, "Masochism Tango," a man tells his lover that "I ache for the touch of your lips, dear/ But much more for the touch of your whips, dear."

A three-member cast -- Stephen Hope, Chad Hudson and Gary Lindemann -- will perform the Lehrer songs.

Hope has performed in previous FST reviews devoted to Cole Porter and George Gershwin.

"The difference this time is, it's about getting up there and having nothing but fun," he said. "There are no deep moments. As an actor, you don't have to dredge up emotions.

"You get to play, and to take the audience along with you so you can all have a good time."

TICKETS

The Rise and Fall of Western Civilization According to Tom Lehrer

Opens at 7:30 p.m. Thursday (following preview performances at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday and Wednesday) at Florida Studio Theatre's Goldstein Cabaret, 1241 N. Palm Ave., Sarasota. Through March 19. Tickets are \$18 and \$20. Call 366-9000, or access www.fst2000.org.

Caption: COURTESY PHOTO

Left to right: Chad Hudson, Stephen Hope and Gary Lindemann

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