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THEATRE REVIEW
Laughing while it all burns: '... Tom Lehrer'

By: Karen Mamone
 News of an impending production of a revue of the musical works of Tom Lehrer is likely to produce one of two responses: "Tom who?" and "Oh, boy!"

For the latter, Florida Studio Theatre's cabaret performances celebrating the career of American songwriter, political and social satirist, teacher, mathematician and singer Thomas Andrew Lehrer is good news indeed, especially at a time when there seems precious little to laugh about.

For the former, "The Rise and Fall of Western Civilization According to Tom Lehrer" is to be recommended as an unbridled delight for those whose tastes run more to spicy than saccharin, and to those not too easily offended.

Lehrer's career might be likened to that of another icon of the same era: writer J.D. Salinger, who produced a small but much-loved body of work, and then withdrew from his chosen art.

In the years in which Lehrer wrote and performed – 1950s to early 1970s – he cast a cold eye on subjects such as nuclear proliferation ("Who's Next?"), environment ("Pollution"), religion ("The Vatican Rag"), race relations ("National Brotherhood Week") and the amorality of scientists ("Werner von Braun").

He also took a scalpel to romance ("The Masochism Tango" and "I Hold Your



(From top) Gary Lindemann, Stephen Hope and Chad Hudson appear in "The Rise and Fall of Western Civilization According to Tom Lehrer" at Florida Studio Theatre.

WHEN YOU GO

* "The Rise and Fall of Western Civilization According to Tom Lehrer," a musical revue, runs through March 19 at Florida Studio Theatre's Cabaret, 1241 N. Palm Ave. * Weekday evenings and matinees are \$22, and weekend evening performances are \$24. Performances are at 6 p.m. Tues., 7:30 p.m. Wed. and Thurs., 6 and 9 p.m. Fri. and Sat., and 2 and 7:30 p.m. Sun. * Call 366-9000 for tickets.

Hand in Mine”), springtime (“Poisoning Pigeons in the Park”) and the Boy Scouts (“Be Prepared”), among many deserving victims.

As a 18-year-old graduate student at Harvard University, Lehrer began to write comic songs to entertain his friends, mostly parodying the current popular songs. He paid for some studio time to record an album, “Songs by Tom Lehrer,” which he sold by mail order to a growing collegiate following. Concert tours and second album followed, but Lehrer hated both touring and singing the same songs over and over.

He gave up political satire, it has been said, when the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Henry Kissinger in 1973 (“an act which makes satire obsolete”). In the 1970s, Lehrer concentrated on teaching mathematics, although he also wrote the occasional educational song for the children’s television show “The Electric Company,” and the weekly satire hit “That Was the Week That Was.” In the early 1980s, “Tomfoolery,” a revival of his songs on the London stage, was a surprise hit, which then moved to a few old stomping grounds such as Boston (where this reviewer joined in the standing ovation).

In 2000, a CD box set, “The Remains of Tom Lehrer,” was released by Rhino Entertainment. It included live and studio versions of his first two albums; “That Was The Year That Was,” the songs he wrote for The Electric Company; and some previously unreleased material, accompanied by a booklet containing an introduction by famed DJ Dr. Demento and lyrics to all the songs. Lehrer is now 76 and retired – and probably still a very funny man.

Three personable young performers – Stephen Hope, Chad Hudson and Gary Lindemann – bring Lehrer’s words and music to FST’s Cabaret. The show is simply and effectively staged by Dennis Courtney, with a prop list that includes Harvard pendants, an assortment of hats and, of course, clerical garb.

A fine ensemble cast keeps the laughs coming and the mood ebullient. Hope, who appeared in last season’s “Showtune” and “Too Darned Hot,” scores high marks as a somewhat nerdy professor in Lehrer’s maddeningly difficult “Elements,” which is the periodic table in song. Big, blond and bawdy, Lindemann is perfect as the “Be Prepared” scout, and baby-faced Chad Hudson, also a “Showtune” vet, is an endearing paramour of “The Pigeon-Poisoner.”

Spirited piano accompaniment by an impish Michael Sebastian deserves special note.



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