

STAGE REVIEW

'Can-Can' Can't in Long Beach Civic Light Opera Performance

By F. KATHLEEN FOLEY
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

A problematic musical, *Can-Can* was critically drubbed when first produced on Broadway in 1953 — for obvious reasons. Although the Cole Porter score yields classics such as *C'est Magnifique* and *I Love Paris*, the book by Abe Burrows is so slight that it barely supports the weight of the show's lavish production numbers.

These numbers, which featured the virtuosic dancing of Gwen Verdon and the infectious rhythms of Porter at his best, were the show's salvation back in 1953.

In Long Beach Civic Light Opera's current production, the footwork and music are little more than a welcome distraction from the overall tedium. When the show's athletic ensemble is on stage dancing the Can-Can, the production sizzles like Paris in the summer. Devoid of dancers, the action is often more hohum than ooh-la-la.

Granted, a lot of the problems are with the show itself. It's a puzzlement why, instead of rethinking and revitalizing his flawed vehicle, director David Thomé opted for a standard staging that only emphasizes the production's weaknesses.

The setting—the bustling, bawdy Montmartre section of Paris circa

1884 — is potentially a rich artist's palette for a lively revival. Thomé's direction, disappointingly, is the equivalent of a black velvet painting; campy, but derivative.

Thomé's largest single problem is the casting of Gretchen Wyler as Simone Pistache, the charmingly greedy cafe proprietress whose establishment is under fire from the authorities because of the "licentious" dance that is being performed there.

A musical comedy veteran of some 40 years standing, Wyler has a throaty-voiced authority and charm that is undeniable. One can envision her as the ideal Dolly Levy, or Mame—or Mrs. Lovett, for that matter. However, to broach a delicate matter, Wyler is decades too old to play Pistache.

Perhaps if Wyler were playing opposite someone roughly her own age, she could have pulled it off. However, to complicate matters, Jeffrey Rockwell has been cast as Wyler's love interest, the strait-laced Parisian judge Aristide Forestier. Now, Rockwell is no stripling, but he is young enough to be Wyler's son, a fact that his sprayed-on gray temples and artfully applied nasal-labial wrinkles cannot conceal, even in the uppermost loges of this huge house.

Hold on, you say. If Robert Redford can play a believably sexy scene opposite Demi Moore, why should Wyler's age



be an issue at all? And in the best of all possible worlds, it probably wouldn't be. However, in light of the time period in which the show is set, the age disparity is jarring. And considering the complete absence of sexual chemistry between Wyler and Rockwell, it is just plain embarrassing.

Other problems arise. Although she is sweetly serviceable as Claudine (the role created by Verdon), Tracy Lore lacks the comic edge essential to the role. Also, Garland Riddle's costumes, although suitably sumptuous, sometimes cross that fine line between the eye-catching and the merely tacky.

On the plus side, Troy Garza's choreography is sprawling and spirited. Barry Pearl plays Claudine's scruffy sculptor boyfriend Boris with precision and humor. Eric Garcia, Grant Rosen and David Burnham, who play Boris' bumbling artist pals, are also savvy crowd-pleasers.

Timothy Smith dis-

plays a sardonic elegance and unerring comic timing as the salacious, snooty art critic Hilaire Jussac. The comic sequences between the bumbling artists and the self-possessed Hilaire are, apart from the dance numbers, among the few high points in this uneven production. All comedy must be based in reality. Of all the cast, Pearl and Smith seem to understand this best, for their characters, although farcical, are fully fleshed and funny.

If only Thomé and his stars, however miscast, could have grasped this simple precept, maybe this *Can-Can* wouldn't be so weak in the knees.

Civic Light Opera's 'Can-Can' Can Too

SATURDAY LETTERS

In F. Kathleen Foley's review of the Long Beach Civic Light Opera's production of *Can-Can* ("Can-Can' Can't in Long Beach Civic Light Opera Performance," Jan. 9), she tries to rationalize her ageist and sexist statement about Gretchen Wyler being too old to play Simone Pistache by writing that "...in light of the time period in which the show is set, the age disparity is jarring." If Foley had read her history, she would know that during the 19th Century older women/younger men liaisons were very common. David Thome's casting is guilty only of being historically accurate. Moreover, the reviewer may have had a problem with the age difference, but, judging from the audience's reaction, the problem was hers alone. My own group of friends, ranging from ages 7 to 39, ages that perhaps might have cared, didn't. Why? One reason is, to use Foley's own words, "Wyler has a throaty-voiced authority and charm that is undeniable." She's also an attractive, sexy woman. So a match with a younger man, (in this case, Jeffrey Rockwell, who was born to sing Cole Porter) or a man of any age, would be believable. And, certainly, the audience thought so. Another reason is because older women/younger men relationships do not take place only, as Foley suggests, "in the best of all possible worlds" but in our world and probably among one's own set of friends. Turn on the television, it's the topic of talk shows, entertainment news, sitcom episodes, interviews with Cher and soon, no doubt, an infomercial. Better yet, turn off the television and read. It's the subject of newspaper and magazine articles, sociological studies, poetry, entire books of both fiction and nonfiction. Older women/younger men relationships are common. It's reactions like Foley's that, fortunately, are uncommon. The original script by Abe Burrows is dated, flawed and boring. Its sleep-inducing power rivals that of prescription drugs. It's not that Tracy Lore

lacks the "comic edge" to play Claudine but that there's no comic edge with which to work. And this is true of most of the characters Burrows created. It is to their credit that David Thome and the cast enhanced the original play by adding new lines and scenes, creating comic bits and giving enthusiastic performances that make a snore of a musical into a funny and pleasurable evening... for most of us.

JAN ROBERTS
Mission Viejo