

Perfumes, Anyone? Sweetness, True Love, and Old Fashioned Charm? Summer Theater Opens With “She Loves Me,” a Romantic Musical Delight

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“A romantic atmosphere” pervades the Hamilton Murray Theater, as Princeton Summer Theater (PST) embarks on its new season with a rollicking, endearing production of *She Loves Me*, a 1963 Broadway hit musical by Jerry Bock (music), Sheldon Harnick (lyrics), and Joe Masteroff (book).

The atmosphere at PST is also full of energy and excitement, as this community of vibrant, committed theater students and young professionals tackles a challenging classic of the musical theater repertoire. It may be a small musical by blockbuster Broadway standards, overshadowed in many ways by Mr. Bock and Mr. Harnick’s *A Fiddler on the Roof*, which opened one year later; and it may seem old fashioned in both its 1930s Budapest setting and its traditional, character-driven romantic fare. But *She Loves Me*, in the capable hands of Sash Bischoff, 2009 Princeton University graduate and currently New York-based director, and her talented 13-member ensemble, takes full advantage of the smallness, which translates into an engaging intimacy and focus, and its old fashioned-ness, which proves to be charming and timeless.

With an impressive contingent of recent graduates and undergraduates from Princeton, NYU, and elsewhere, Princeton Summer Theater is winning over sell-out audiences with this luminous and endearing, thoroughly professional opening production. The outlook for its 45th season could hardly be brighter, as its stimulating, eclectic season continues in July with Beth Henley’s *Crimes of the Heart* and a stage adaptation of Alfred Hitchcock and John Buchan’s *The 39 Steps*, followed by Donald Margulies *Time Stands Still* in August.

Set in a perfume shop, *She Loves Me* is a retelling of Miklos Laszlo’s Hungarian play, *Parfumerie*, first staged in 1937. The fact that this story has inspired at least three popular movies — *The Shop Around the Corner* in 1940 with James Stewart, *In the Good Old Summertime* in 1947 with Judy Garland, and *You’ve Got Mail* in 1998 with Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan, in addition to *She Loves Me*, is ample evidence of the timeless appeal of this simple story of two perfume clerks who squabble constantly, but, unknown to each other, are romantic pen pals deeply in love with their anonymous correspondents.

She Loves Me presents a variety of stories and perspectives on love and romance amongst the seven major characters. In every role, every musical number, and every major scene these characters and their complex human relationships come to vibrant life through the high-quality acting and commitment to character, first-rate musical accompaniment, superb vocal talent

throughout the cast, and the finely tuned pacing, direction, and choreography.

The seven-piece band, under the unerring baton of Emily Whitaker, occupies an orchestra pit in the background across the upstage area, and creates an unobtrusive but powerful presence in delivering this melodious music, as well as supporting the plot and character development here.

The redoubtable, ingenious Jeffrey Van Velsor (set designer) and Laura Hildebrand (technical director) lead the production team and create with flair and resourcefulness the world of Maracek's perfumerie and its inhabitants. The scenes shift smoothly and rapidly as the three-part walls turn to transform the locale from inside to outside the shop, then to various other interior and exterior Budapest locations. Alex Mannix's striking and apt lighting and Annika Bennett's expressive, colorful period costumes further transport the audience into the world of *She Loves Me*.

As the central quarrelsome duo, Woody Buck as Georg and Holly Linneman as Amalia are strong from start to finish, with confident, appealing voices, credible, compelling characterizations, and a lively chemistry. They win over the audience from the start, and anticipation rises as the mystery of the anonymous romantic epistles gradually unfolds.

From their romantic reflections over each other's letters ("Three Letters," "I Don't Know His Name") to eager anticipation at the thought of their first meeting ("Tonight at Eight," "Will He Like Me?") to their disappointments, at the end of the first of two acts, when the meeting doesn't quite come off ("Dear Friend") — Mr. Buck and Ms. Linneman successfully establish this show's heartwarming central core. A break-through in their romantic travails, precipitated by a gift of "Vanilla Ice Cream," and the realization of deep feelings on both sides ("She Loves Me") come to life in two wonderfully rich and memorable theatrical moments here.

In contrast with this fairy tale romance, Amalia's outspoken friend and confidante, Ilona Ritter (Katrina Michaels), has her own romantic dilemmas. Ms. Michaels uses an attention-grabbing stage presence and her strong, confident vocal talents to advantage in creating this sympathetic, entertaining character who learns her own lessons in dealing with the vicissitudes of romance with a two-timing (or is it more than two?) paramour.

As Kodaly, Ilona's urbane, deceiving lover, Kenny Francoeur maintains his suave, charming façade to the end. He crowns his exhortations of true love in the face of all evidence to the contrary in his first-rate song-and-dance numbers, "Ilona" near the end of the first act and his smilingly caustic farewell, "Grand Knowing You," near the end of the second act.

Meanwhile, in another one of several subplots, Arpad (Brad Wilson), the bicycle-riding, eager young errand boy aspiring to become a clerk, provides perspective and some light comic background as he observes the proceedings, learns some life lessons, and develops in maturity and character as the plot unwinds.

Tommy Prast's Sipos, another perfume clerk, effectively lends the jaded vantage point of age and experience to the proceedings, while Evan Thompson's Mr. Maraczek, the aging owner of the shop, contributes additional darker shadings to the tone of *She Loves Me* with his nostalgic reminiscences of his youth, in the tuneful "Days Gone By," and his despair and suicide attempt over his wife's infidelity.

In addition to these intriguing stories, the importance of the ensemble, mostly nameless and in the background though they be, should not be underestimated. Chris Beard, Maeve Brady, Victoria Gruenberg, Emma Paton, Pat Rounds, and Nikki Yarnell, in a variety of roles from fashionable perfume shoppers to restaurant patrons (with a highly dramatic and athletic tour de force by Mr. Beard as the head waiter), sustain their own complex characters and remain credible throughout in helping to create this captivating world.

In discussing the four major productions of the 2013 Princeton Summer Theater season, artistic director Emma Watt says, "They were bound by a common theme of making the ordinary extraordinary." With its exquisite music, lyrics, and book, under the direction of Ms. Bischoff and her superb PST company, *She Loves Me* does just that and promises a dynamic, exhilarating PST season ahead.