

## Play based on movie charts middle-ground course

By Mark Hughes Cobb Staff Writer

Posted Feb 17, 2017 at 10:00 AM

Performing live a work known mostly for film presents dilemmas. Do you mirror, or re-invent so as to dodge comparison? What should actors do with iconic roles?

Approaches vary. Numerous adaptations of “It’s a Wonderful Life” exist, taking new slants, because no one wants to compete with Frank Capra and Jimmy Stewart. The also-overexposed “A Christmas Story” has theatrical versions, but there the play is for memories, like a cover band making people dance to someone else’s songs.

The smart course charts somewhere down the middle, tacking where the wind blows while relying on landmarks for guidance. Compromise is rarely as sexy as re-invention, but it can take you for the ride, show you new things, then still get you home safe and sound.

Philip Barry’s “The Philadelphia Story” became a Broadway hit in 1939, but modern audiences know it from the 1940 film starring Katharine Hepburn, Cary Grant and Jimmy Stewart. None of those show in Annie G. Levy’s version for the University of Alabama, which is finely yar. Yar’s an old sailing term -- not to be confused with the piratical groan -- helpfully defined in the script: “It means, uh, easy to handle, quick to the helm, fast, right. Everything a boat should be, until she develops dry rot.”

On the Marian Gallaway stage, Andy Fitch’s set fits: swift, sure, productive. There’s enough in windows, topiary, stairs and furniture to suggest the sprawl of a New England estate. When changes come, they’re in musical interludes, pieces shifted in petite, comic dances. Likewise the costume work by Chalise Ludlow draws in period and place, but hangs just a hem or two from contemporary.

Levy’s plumbed levels beyond the top line, via servants. Placing them behind the action, bending to plot like flowers to the sun, or expressing emotional currents, as when Alex Renee Hubbard’s maid Elsie gently showers petals on the model of the sailboat built by the true lovers of the tale, Levy’s using the men and women in black as a mostly mute Greek chorus, while pointing out how the upper crust don’t see lower classes. They’re invisible to all but the voyeuristic audience.

That’s not post-modern muck. Barry dives into class warfare, making salient notes about individuality. Not all working folk are virtuous and noble; not all rich kids are snotty, worthless leeches. Anyone can be a decent, productive human, as all can dive the depths of depravity. The rich just have the money, power and time to get it done.

The cast lovingly recreates the breezy style when snappy banter between crafted characters could drive a hit. Atop the peak is Lily DiSilverio, remarkably just a sophomore, handling the role created for Hepburn, Tracy Lord, with languid ease. It's not an imitation -- none are, thankfully -- but a thoughtful study drawn from the same well of inspirations.

Tracy's mother Margaret and sister Dinah are nicely etched by Cindy Spitko and Emily Haynes. Spitko keeps the concerned mom and troubled wife on a leash, but lets through enough to show Tracy's spine and intelligence stem from the maternal side. Haynes' bouncy tomboyish sister infects from the start. When others seem squeaky-clean or self-involved, Haynes' Dinah is pure delight, slapstick relief within a comedy of manners.

The men seem at home in finery and style as well, from Chris Ciulla's lean and easy C.K. Dexter Haven to Kyle Chesney's ebullient, warm Sandy, Tracy and Dinah's big brother, who's flexible connective tissue. Ciulla walks a fine line, staying on the charm side of smarm. It's another case of mature control; he never pushes, but abides 'til his time's right. Matt Gabbard's Mike roams a wider range, and does so with energetic style, as the reporter who projects ugliness on the uppers, only to find, via Tracy, that the time to make up your mind about people is never. Ian Andersen powers on, as he often does, sparking a welcome brightness in the already fiery firmament, as dodgy Uncle Willie, and David Trump arrives late, but pungently, as louche dad Seth Lord, kicking complications up a notch.

If there was room, all would receive a pat. Think of it less as a star vehicle, despite shine, and more an ensemble shifting gracefully from classical to pop into the birth of jazz, an amalgamation flowing inevitably toward happy endings.