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MSU puts on a show

This is at the core of show business: Someone says (or thinks): "Hey kids, let's put on a show."

That's the notion behind "Babes in Arms" -- the 1937 Broadway show, the '39 Judy Garland/Mickey Rooney movie and now the revamped version that Michigan State University is doing through Sunday at the Pasant Theatre of the Wharton Center. You can catch tickets at 432-2000.

How is it? Well, visually and kinetically, it's spectacular; Greg Ganakas has stirred up a dazzling show, turning kids who haven't tap-danced into master dancers. And the rest -- musically, comedically, dramatically? It's borderline adequate. Borderline.

Catch the show, though. The visual kinetic part is reward enough. Will Slanger-Grant -- an East Lansing High track star, joining the college crowd -- is a spectacularly good tapper. Kellyn Uhl, the dance captain, is also superb. More impressively, Ganakas has molded all the others into a dandy tap nation. They bring energy and zest. Stephanie Koenig and James Broughton really do feel like Judy-and-Mickey (if Mickey suddenly grew a foot taller).

The rest is harder. For decades, people have figured "Babes" had great Rodgers-and-Hart songs and a weak story. So Joe Dipietro kept the songs (even adding a few) and wrote a new book. Randy Skinner created choreography, for a version that debuted at the acclaimed Goodspeed Opera House in Connecticut.

Now MSU has done a worthy job of transferring it. Ganakas has beautifully directed it and adapted Skinner's choreography. Kirk Domer has created a great set, as usual; the kids have danced and zoomed superbly.

The catch? Dipietro's script is kind of fun, with sly digs at music-comedy traditions, but not exceptional. There are some fine moments of comedy and drama (especially from guest stars Lela Ivey and Martin Underhill, who play the only grown-ups), but not a lot.

The songs are great, of course. They include "Blue Moon" and "My Funny Valentine" and "With a Song in My Heart" and "The Lady is a Tramp" and "Johnny One-Note." The singers are all OK, but with the possible exception of Brittane Rowe-Rhodes, none is exceptional.

So don't go for the music or the comedy or the drama. Go for the dance and energy and zest. That's sort of reward enough.

Posted by Mike Hughes at 11:30 PM | [Permalink](#)


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