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REVIEW: "The Big Bang"

Williamston Theatre

Biblical times, ancient civilizations, notable despots and discoveries, European history and the revelation of the Americas and the Far East.

Contrasted with this promise of grandeur, the reality of two nervous writers trying to generate the same buzz in far more modest surroundings is the source of much absurdity. But what begins as a laughably clumsy attempt at a multimedia presentation quickly reveals itself as this show's secret weapon. The stealthy collaboration of designers Kirk Domer (set), Alex Gay (lights), Karen Kangas-Preston (costumes), Bruce Bennett (properties), and Shannon T. Schweitzer (media) is utterly remarkable.

At first glance, the New York City home of Jed and Boyd's hosts is all coolly tasteful ambience, the kind of moody luxury that might make an '80s movie villain sit up and take notice. Yet when words fail and impromptu "picture this" embellishment is needed, the place morphs into a kind of ingenuity palace, wherein set dressings become ad-hoc props – and props instantaneous costumes – and the fussy, integrated home lighting scheme and slideshow not only bend to the writers' needs, but sometimes anticipate them as well.

Every choice serves to reinforce that the players really are Boyd and Jed; that this is not "The Big Bang" the Williamston play, but rather the backer's audition for "The Big Bang" at Dr. Thus-and-So's posh residence; that what's at stake is the viewer's enthusiasm, and how much of it is needed to make a checkbook appear. In this vein, the pre-show flows seamlessly into the actual show, and the bullet points of a conventional curtain speech are folded deftly into the content, including consciously gratuitous product placement for the theater's actual sponsors. From their vantage point deep, deep undercover, the performers maintain stalwart conviction (if not confidence), which is the only way to sustain interest in a product this piecemeal, intentionally overblown, and frequently hokey.

While the writing is cute and good for a chuckle, the play itself makes little claim of depth, which is why the characterizations provide a much-needed final comic layer – infinitesimal glimpses at the nervous underbelly of two deeply uncool artists aiming way above their entrepreneurial aptitude. Roznowski's direction and Gwynn and Steinberg's vigorously affable performances reward close viewing with little slip-ups and moments of doubt or panic that give dimension and flair to a flat story arc.

Credit is also due to the unsung third character, music director Jeff English, who tinkles away on an onstage keyboard, never faltering with a cue and supplying just the right amount of saucy interjection.

This "Big Bang" takes a single, germinating concept and works within that simplicity to explode it into a fully realized musical that, in its own way, must be seen to be believed. The show gets in and gets out; any longer and it might overstay its welcome. But this thoroughly immersive, complete little world is undoubtedly a fun place to visit, with its humorously underwhelming pretense and surreptitiously overwhelming finesse.

SHOW DETAILS: 'The Big Bang'

Williamston Theatre
 122 S. Putnam Road, Williamston
 8 p.m. Thursday, July 24, 31, Aug. 7, 14
 8 p.m. Friday, July 25, Aug. 1, 8, 15
 3 p.m. & 8 p.m. Saturday, July 19, 26, Aug. 2, 9 16
 2 p.m. Sunday, July 20, 27, Aug. 3, 10 17
 80 minutes; no intermission
 \$20-25
 517-655-SHOW
www.williamstontheatre.org

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Showing and telling the secret to quirky musical's flourish

By Carolyn Hayes

Posted: July 19, 2014 at 3:35 p.m.

Ever since there was a Broadway, there have been epic Broadway musicals ever topping themselves; to bring in top tourist dollars, producers need something that must be seen to be believed. But how does such a show even get to the stage, when investors must believe, but there's nothing to see? Such is the comic conundrum of "The Big Bang" (music by Jed Feuer; book and lyrics by Boyd Graham), the tiniest extravaganza that the theater world has ever seen. As directed by Rob Roznowski, Williamston Theatre's production capitalizes on the silliness of describing that which defies description, but also reaches into a different bag of theatrical tricks, wrapping up an absurd principle in sheer entertainment.

The substance of the show resides entirely within its Russian nesting doll of a premise. "The Big Bang," the musical concocted by two guys named Jed and Boyd, is about two guys named "Jed" (Zev Steinberg) and "Boyd" (Matthew Gwynn) who have, coincidentally, written a musical (one guess what it's called). But in the world of the show, Jed and Boyd's musical is still in its infancy and needs cash to get from page to stage, and so they've arranged what's known as a backer's audition, in which they describe their vision and perform selections in order to get potential investors on board.

Imagine Mel Brooks trying to sell "History of the World, Part I" to several dozen strangers in someone's living room. Add more songs, and there's the gist of it: The audience becomes the investors, the actual "Bang" is the pitch, and the comedy comes from both what is and what is not being shown.

Among the running jokes in the production is the sheer excess of the spectacle being proposed, which in its finished form promises hundreds of performers, thousands of costumes, and a projected budget that strings together an eye-crossing quantity of zeroes. The subject matter spans the history of time and space, from the titular big bang to the present day, which allows the highlighted topics to freely draw from middle and high-school-level curricula: galaxy formation, Biblical times, ancient civilizations, notable despots and discoveries, European history and the revelation of the Americas and the Far East.