

Florida Festival of New Musicals is a hit for Winter Park Playhouse

By MATTHEW J. PALM ORLANDO SENTINEL |
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Orlando resident Ned Wilkinson wrote "Flaming Volcano Bed & Breakfast," an offering at the Florida Festival of New Musicals in Winter Park. Reading the work at Winter Park Playhouse were Dustin Cunningham (from left), Courtney Cunningham, Kelly Wells, Monica Titus and Michael Scott Ross. (Winter Park Playhouse / Courtesy photo)

The Florida Festival of New Musicals brought more people than ever before to Winter Park Playhouse during its four-day run. The fest, which ended Sunday, showcases fresh works through readings and discussions with the creators — giving Central Florida audiences the chance to influence the shows' development.

Three of the six performances nicely illustrated how musicals, although one theatrical genre, can vary in tone. "Flaming Volcano Bed & Breakfast," by Orlando musician Ned Wilkinson was a lighthearted romp, with a sprinkling of magic and mythology.

"Betwixt and Between," by Kate Hanenberg, Ned Paul Ginsburg and Mary Lloyd-Butler, felt more epic with its atmospheric music, multitude of characters and plot twists. And "Good

Girls Only” took a documentary approach with its real-life story of a New York boarding house through the years. Charles Leipart and Jamey Grisham have written a spirited show with Grisham’s music beautifully capturing the 1940s, ‘50s and more modern sounds.

In its third year, the event drew more than 1,200 patrons — about a 10 percent increase from the 2018 festival.

“We had a constant buzz over all four days, Thursday to Sunday, with so many young and new faces,” Playhouse marketing director Lisa Melillo told me. “People were traveling in and staying at our partner hotels (the downtown DoubleTree by Hilton, and Comfort Suites Downtown) — all coming to experience new work.”

Now, here’s something to consider. While theatergoers are there to enjoy themselves, there is serious business going on at the same time. Six New York City producers flew down to check out the works; musical theater doesn’t happen without the investment of producers.

Also, seeing their shows come to life onstage is critical for the creative team to figure out what still needs fine-tuning. Ginsburg, of “Betwixt and Between,” said experiencing his show as a performance — not just words and musical notes on paper — made him realize the story should focus more strongly on the main family’s father.



The Florida Festival of New Musicals featured a reading of "Good Girls Only," with (from left to right) Zach Nadolski, Brian Brammer, Tay Anderson, Patrece Bloomfield, Dayla Carroll, Allison Piehl, Holli Trisler, Rebecca Jo Lightfoot and Christopher Leavy on piano (Winter Park Playhouse / Courtesy photo)

“The musical, artistic and organizing talents gathered to bring our work alive before an audience were generous, loving and exceptional,” wrote Leipart and Grisham of “Good Girls Only” in an email. “Their work helped raise our show to a new level of realization. The festival has been a gift to writers and lovers of new musical theater.”

The event also raises the profile of the Central Florida arts scene across the country; the Playhouse received accolades for its work from the National Alliance for Musical Theatre. Show creators were impressed by the local talent of professional actors, directors, musicians and stage managers.

“We were blown away by the casting,” said Larry Little, producer of “Island of Misfits: The Musical,” a family-friendly tale about the Island of Misfit Toys. “The music direction was superb, and the audiences were so eager, insightful and helpful with their feedback.”

I was also impressed with the community support shown for this growing festival, in only its third year. I’m not speaking of the audience members; I’m saluting the folks who opened their checkbooks to make it happen. Among the festival sponsors were local institutions such as Rollins College, the Winter Park Community Redevelopment Agency and Orange County’s department of Arts & Cultural Affairs. But local businesses The Park Press and The Printers stepped up, as well — and more than 20 individuals, from the president of the Playhouse board of directors to passionate musical-theater devotees.

It’s just grand that so many parts of the community can share in the festival’s success. I can’t wait for next year.

Matthew J. Palm

Matthew J. Palm has watched hundreds of plays, ballets, symphony concerts, operas and other staged shows since first seeing "Les Miserables" as a teenager in Upstate New York. A graduate of Syracuse University, he is the Orlando Sentinel's arts writer and theater critic.