

“MEET ME IN ST. LOUIS” IS HEART WARMING AT MUSICAL THEATRE WEST IN LONG BEACH

The advertisement for “Meet Me in St. Louis”, now being presented at the Carpenter Center by Musical Theatre West, is a drawing of a snow globe. Snow globes were a gift a child treasured at the turn of the 19th century. It was a simpler time, when family values were also treasured, as epitomized in the musical “Meet Me in St. Louis”, which is being lovingly revived in a production that will warm your heart.

This stage version of “Meet Me in St. Louis” is based on the 1944 MGM classic that starred Judy Garland and Margaret O’Brien. It is the summer of 1903 in St. Louis, Missouri, the year before St. Louis is to be the host of the 1904 World’s Fair.

The focus of the story is the Smith family of 5135 Kensington Avenue. They are a happy collection of mother, father, four feisty daughters, one dutiful son, and a cantankerous Irish maid.

We watch the romance between oldest daughter Rose (Sarah Bermudez) and the wealthy Warren Sheffield (Jeremy Bernard) rise and fall between spats. Second daughter Esther (Cassie Silva) puts her claws out for the new boy next door, John Truitt (Jason Evans). Third and fourth daughters Tootie (Grace Kaufman) and Agnes (Alexa Freeman) get into trouble like all children do at their pre-adolescent ages. And son Lon is about to depart for an Ivy League university.

The big plot point comes when father announces that he has taken a promotion with his firm, which will mean the whole family will move to New York City. The family is devastated, but firm in their resolve to stick together as family. However, all ends happily when father sees the mistake he’s made and the musical ends with the whole family taking the trolley out to the St. Louis fairgrounds to visit the World’s Fair.

On the surface this show looks like just another fluffy musical. But if you dare to look a little deeper you will see the significance of the era that it is depicting. Just about everything the Smith’s do individually is motivated by how it will affect the family. This is a family that puts the family first. That was over 100 years ago. When you look at films and plays of today they are more often about the individual’s needs and not the family as a unit.

The production here is, to the best of my memory, superior to the one that graced Broadway in 1989. One of the main reasons to revisit this music is the wonderful songs. The score includes, “Meet Me in St. Louis”, “The Trolley Song”, “The Boy Next Door”, “Skip to My Lou”, “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas” and the added “You Are for Loving”.

One of the dangers of doing this show is that you have to fill the very large shoes from the film of Judy Garland as Esther and Margaret O’Brien as Tootie. It is a pleasure to report that while they don’t entirely fill those shoes, both give very good performances that will have you smiling. Ms. Silva as Esther makes the part her own, and with Mr. Evans as John Truitt they stop the show with the love ballad “You Are for Loving”. The whole cast sings with clarity and richness that you don’t hear too often any more in musicals.

With its colorful costumes and sets, “Meet Me in St. Louis” is a Currier and Ives Christmas card come to life. It has that same joy and twinkle that a toddler has when it sees a snow globe for the first time. If your heart is not warmed by this story of family love and values then perhaps you’d better check to see if you still have a heart. “Meet Me in St. Louis” should have you exiting the theatre humming those great songs and cherishing the family you have.. - *Larry Blake*

“Meet Me in St. Louis” a revival of the musical, songs by Hugh Martin and Ralph Blane, and book by Hugh Wheeler. Now being presented by Musical Theatre West at the Carpenter Performing Arts Center, 6200 Atherton, Long Beach, through November 15, 562-856-1999 x4, www.musical.org Ticket prices: \$10-\$80