

'Forum' promises, delivers comedy

By Carrie Moore, Custer County Chronicle

"Something familiar, something peculiar, something for everyone: a comedy tonight!" is the promise of the Black Hills Playhouse's third play of the season, "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum." By the end of the night, that promise was delivered. In a nearly packed house — with Gov. Dennis and First Lady Linda Daugaard in attendance — the cast of 18 took the stage with a song, a dance and hilarious lines.

"Forum" was written by Burt Shevelove and Larry Gelbart, with music and lyrics provided by Stephen Sondheim, and first opened on Broadway in 1962. It has won several Tony awards. Even though the script is over 50 years old, there's not a single joke that doesn't get a laugh, proving it's the king when it comes to farce.

Inspired by the farces of the ancient Roman playwright Plautus, specifically "Pseudolus," "Miles Gloriosus" and "Mostellaria," the musical tells the story of a slave named Pseudolus (Eric Johnson) and his attempts to win his freedom by helping his young master, Hero (Nate Rocke), woo the girl next door, Philia (Ceci Quintero), a virgin of the neighboring courtesan house, who is already promised to a Roman general (Hayden Kraus).

As a way to help, Pseudolus, an excellent liar, uses Philia's cheery disposition to convince Lycus (Joshua Carroll), the owner of the neighboring courtesan house, that she has picked up a plague from Crete, which causes its victims to smile endlessly in its terminal stages. By offering to isolate her in his master's home, he is able to give Philia and Hero some time alone together and the two fall in love.

When Hero's parents return early from a trip, a neighbor returns home and Philia's promised husband arrives, things get downright messy. Mistaken identities, a handful of lies and a riveting group chase scene will have the audience laughing.

Under the direction of Matt Nesmith, the cast has both lightning-quick responses and great delivery. From the do-it-all Proteans (Jamie Fields, Joey Galda and Tim Huggenberger) to Lycus's courtesans (Brianna Bernard, Paige Hauer, Morgan Daniels, Emily Dorsett, Breanna Danielle and Emily Vortherms), it's easy to see that everyone embraced the material with a fun-loving rapport that doesn't feel forced. The farce — complete with puns, slamming doors, mistaken identity and satirical comments — is perfectly executed, no doubt due to Nesmith's stage and music direction.

In this performance, Playhouse alum and Broadway actor Johnson reprises his role as Pseudolus (which he also played at the Playhouse in 1974), a role that has been performed on Broadway by Jason Alexander, Nathan Lane and Whoopi Goldberg. If this alone isn't enough to get your hands on a ticket, Johnson's comedic timing is gold and his performance captivating. It would be very easy for him to steal the show if it weren't for the talented cast alongside him.

Jeff Kingsbury slays as Hysterium, a perpetually nervous slave who goes along with Pseudolus' lies. His performances of "I'm Calm" and "Lovely" are as funny as they are enduring. Kevin Pellicone as the unsteady neighbor, Erronius, plays his role in a clever, side-splitting manner. Arica Coleman's Domina and Mark Norberg's Senex (Hero's parents) are also a great comedy team as they hilariously play off each other's disdain for

one another. Locke's Hero doesn't get much stage time in the second act, but his first act performances of "Love, I Hear" and "Free" make up for that.

Even though the play is set in Roman times, the director, scenic designer, costume designer and choreographer used '60s flair when it came to design, clothing and dance. Choreography for "Forum" was done by Debra Workman and is wonderfully executed, namely by the courtesans. According to Workman, each courtesan has a specific animalistic quality to their persona, which reflected in the dance they performed when introduced.

"I read the script and listened to the music over and over in order to get the movement worked out," she said. "We wanted to take it in the direction of the 1960s with some of the dance moves."

When it came to dancing, Workman worked with each actor and their capabilities.

Rehearsal for the dances and staging began June 11.

"I always tell them, 'The goal is to make you look good,'" she said. "It's very physical work they are doing and, at times, all 18 actors are up there!"

The set also reflects the 1960s with bright colors and fun patterns, which scenic designer Kathy Voecks aimed for.

"We wanted it to have that '60s flavor while still keeping you in Roman times," she said. "Even though it's set in an historical period, the '60s translate through the paintings, marble and bright colors."

A big example in the set's design was the television show "Laugh-In," with tons of doors and windows and painted details. Set construction began nearly three weeks ago.

"There's always tons of doors when it comes to a farce," Voecks said.

Since mistaken identities are a huge part of "Forum," costume designer Amber Marisa Cook used masks to fulfill that aspect of the show. The courtesans wear masks during their stage appearances, keeping the theme of their animalistic personas. The costumes, like the entire production, are bright, fantastic and beautiful.

If anyone is looking for a laugh, make sure to see "Forum" before it's too late.

"A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum" (rated PG) runs through Sunday, July 21. Bonus features are held before opening night performances at 6:40 p.m.

Call (605) 255-4141 or toll free at (855) 584-4141 for tickets. More information on "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum" or the two other plays may be found on the Black Hills Playhouse website, blackhillsplayhouse.com. It also has a Facebook page (facebook.com/BHPNews) filled with behind-the-scenes articles and photos, as well as news from the playhouse and alumni.