

The Wild Party

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Don't expect to see Andrew Lippa's *The Wild Party* on any of our CLO stages any time soon. The adults-only nature of the 2000 off-Broadway hit make it an unlikely choice for family-friendly subscription-based CLO seasons. That's why UC Irvine's current big-stage, live-orchestra production has real event status. Unlike MITG's memorable book-in-hand staged reading in 2004 or numerous fine intimate theater productions which have followed, UC Irvine's staging is lushly staged and backed by a nine-piece pit orchestra. That it also features a cast every bit as talented as those performing in professional productions around town makes it a must-see for *Wild Party* lovers and newbies alike.

The Wild Party takes as its source material Joseph Moncure March's 1928 epic poem, its opening song beginning just as the poem does with the lines, "Queenie was a blonde and her age stood still, and she danced twice a day in vaudeville. Queenie was a blonde, and if looks could kill, she would kill twice a day in vaudeville."

The basic plot is fairly simple. Platinum blonde vaudeville entertainer Queenie (Annie Nelson) and her abusive lover of seven years, fellow vaudevillian Burrs (Garrett Deagon), throw a party for their friends: lesbian Madelaine True (Kara Rooney), pugilist Eddie (Andreas de Rond), "sweet dancer" Jackie (Ian Parmenter), pianist-composers Oscar and Phil D'Armano (Sean Garner and Danny Miller), hooker Dolores (Taylor Jackson Ross), "looker" Mae (Stefanie Miller), and Nadine (Amy Perkins)—"a minor." Things start out wild and get even wilder when a patootie named Kate (Lital Abrahams) arrives with her latest flame, Black (Ian Michael Stuart). Black and Queenie hit it off—with tragic consequences.

All the best previous *Wild Party* stagings have borne the distinctive stamp of their director, and UCI's is no exception. Since its two lead characters are vaudeville performers, director Dennis Beasley has cleverly staged Lippa's specialty numbers as vaudeville performances interspersed into the real-time party sequences—much as Rob Marshall made dream sequences out of many of Chicago's and *Nine's* song-and-dance numbers.

"Queenie Was A Blonde," the show opener, is performed by Queenie and eight backup dancers in front of the red velvet curtain before it rises to reveal the apartment she shares with Burrs, and the same it true with Kate's "The Life Of The Party," which opens Act Two. A huge red Valentine's Day heart drops down behind Madelaine True for her show-stopping "An Old Fashioned Love Story," and Eddie and Mae perform "Two Of A Kind" in front of a drop depicting a beach scene, the party guests fading into the background.

There has been no dumbing down or cleaning up of *The Wild Party's* R-rated scenes for UCI student audiences. Language is spicy, some of the characters get vulgar, Madelaine True is as girl-crazy as ever, there is boy-on-boy canoodling, and though everyone keeps their underwear on in the "Come With Me" orgy sequence, it is every bit as provocative as it is written to be. Kudos to all involved for maintaining the integrity of the original material.

Performances range from very good to downright spectacular. Nelson gives Queenie her all, her vocal performances of "Out Of The Blue," "Raise The Roof," "Maybe I Like It This Way," and "How Did We Come To This" among the best. Star-in-the-making Deagon virtually reinvents the role of Burrs, the tall, lanky song-and-dance man cast (brilliantly) against type, yet every bit as mad and menacing as bigger, bulkier Burrs have been before. As Black, a terrific Stuart is such a powerful, steady presence that it's no wonder Queenie falls head over heels after years with manic Burrs/Deagon. Both Stuart and Deagon have rich, powerful pipes, quite possibly the best I've heard yet in these roles. Triple-threat Abrahams is the very definition of firecracker as Kate, "Look At Me Now" and "Life Of The Party" both proving veritable show-stoppers. It doesn't get better than when all four leads join voices in "Poor Child" and "Listen To Me."

It's hard for a comedic actress/singer to go wrong with "An Old-Fashioned Love Story," but Rooney's is better than excellent—quirky, outrageous, and funny as all get-out. The usually-cast-as-chunky Eddie turns hunky this time around, de Rond making him a deliciously dumb himbo opposite a superbly ditzy Miller as petite Mae. (Their "Two Of A Kind" has never been better performed.) Parmenter moves exquisitely in the jazz-balletic "Jackie's Last Dance." Lookalikes Garner and Miller are a sizzling Oscar and Phil. Ross, Perkins, Alan Dronek (Sam), and Danny Moreno (Max) provide fine vocal and dance support, Moreno doing some spectacularly high scat singing. Sarah Beth Markus, Ashley Nordland, Isaak Olson, Isaac Robinson-Smith, Yael





Wartens, and Perry Young are the triple-threat chorus whose singing/dancing backs up Nelson and Abrahams so sensationally in the Acts One and Two openers. Keith Foster voices the angry off-stage neighbor.

Top marks go to musical director/conductor Daniel Gary Busby and the live pit orchestra, with associate conductor Dennis Castellano on piano. Megan Dahlberg's choreography stands out particularly in the vaudeville numbers. Sheryl Liu's cluttered apartment set is nicely flexible, allowing the audience to view the party goings-on from different perspectives. Joe Kucharski's costumes are dazzlers (though I would have raised Queenie's hemline for a sexier, Roaring 20s look). Adam Levine's lighting fits every scene and mood change to a T. After a pair of Wild Party productions where voices were sometimes drowned out by the accompaniment, it's gratifying to report that Todd Hendricks' sound design mixes orchestra and miked voices to perfection. Joel Veenstra is stage manager.

If there's any drawback to UCI's production of The Wild Party it's the following: The week-and-a-half run ends on Saturday. That leaves only four more performances at this review's posting for SoCal audiences to catch this all-around superb production. Forget that it's cast entirely with students. You won't find a better group of pros anywhere around these parts. Go see The Wild Party before it's too late. Trust me. You don't want to regret missing this one.

UCI Claire Trevor Theatre, UC Irvine Campus, Irvine. Thursday and Friday at 8:00. Saturday at 2:00 and 8:00. Reservations and information:
<http://www.arts.uci.edu/event/wild-party>

--Steven Stanley
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Photos: Paul Kennedy

