

Arts

'Bells Are Ringing' on stage in musical-comedy romp

By Bev Sykes

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Gia Battista and Ian Hopps just may be the quintessential musical comedy couple. They play Ella and Jeff in "Bells are Ringing," the second half of the Davis Shakespeare Ensemble's summer festival, now at the Veterans Memorial Theater through July 31.

"Bells are Ringing," by Betty Comden and Adolph Green, with music by Jule Styne, is directed by Dennis Beasley (his directorial debut with DSE). Written in 1956, it was a vehicle for Judy Holliday and while it may be thin on plot (as are most musicals of that era), it is long on heart, music and dance.

Battista's Ella is a spunky heroine, who makes every appearance on stage a delight. She works at "Susanswerphone" and can't help getting involved in the lives of those for whom she takes messages.

Gia Battista plays Ella in the Davis Shakespeare Ensemble's current production of "Bells Are Ringing," which continues in repertory with "Cyrano de Bergerac" through July 31 at the Veterans Memorial Theater. Jessica Woehler/Courtesy photo

A fine festival

What: "Bells Are Ringing," running in repertory with "Cyrano de Bergerac" as part of the Davis Shakespeare Festival

When: Through July 31, with showtimes at 8 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays and 2 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays; visit www.shakespearedavis.org for a complete schedule

Where: Veterans Memorial Theater, 203 E. 14th St.

Tickets for each show: \$25 general, \$20 students/seniors, \$15 children 12 and younger; www.shakespearedavis.org or 530-802-0998

She has her favorites, particularly Blake Barton (Kevin Gish), an out-of-work method actor; Dr. Kitchell (Tim Gaffaney), a dentist who hates dentistry and just wants to write music; and playwright Jeff Moss (Hopps), who is suffering from writer's block. He calls her "mom" because she uses an old lady voice and he thinks of her as a mother who pushes him to do better.

Ella considers the relationships with these clients "perfect" because she can't see them and they can't see her ("It's a Perfect Relationship").

When Jeff leaves his phone unplugged and thus she cannot call to wake him for an important meeting, she sneaks into his apartment to wake him up. Their relationship begins, though Jeff doesn't have a clue who she really is.

Hopps is a dream of a leading man, a younger, thinner Matt Damon-type with the dancing grace of Neil Patrick Harris. He and Battista have great chemistry and though they endure the expected bumps in the road over their two days together, you know that eventually it will all come out just fine.



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A minor plot concerns Sandor (Kyle Stoner), a bookmaker, who decides that "Susanswerphone" is the perfect cover for his book-making activities. Sue (Sydney Schwindt) is blissfully unaware of his real business and he keeps her off base by pretending to court her while she thinks she is helping his "Titanic Records."

Stoner is just wonderfully sleazy. He leads perhaps the most fun song of the show, explaining how his system works.

*It's a simple little system any child can understand
The composers' names, we list them with the racetracks of the land...*

...

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(The system might have worked if only Beethoven had written a 10th symphony.)

At the same time for some unknown reason (but important to the finale), Inspector Barnes (J.R. Yancher) is convinced "Susanswerphone" is a cover-up for a call-girl operation and sets out, along with his assistant Francis (Johnny Quesada), to follow Ella and see if he can catch her cavorting with the customers.

The base set from the previous night's "Cyrano" works well as the setting for "Bells are Ringing" and nicely camouflages the seven-piece orchestra, directed by Peter Kagstrom, in the middle of everything.

The only thing missing from the opening-night performance was a larger audience. It would be a shame if more people didn't see this excellent production.

For a housekeeping note, the high school parking lot is closed for the summer, but parking is available either on the street, in the St. James Catholic Church parking lot or in the parking lot at the Stephens Branch Library. The city also has created a new white zone directly in front of the Veterans Memorial Center for easy drop-offs.

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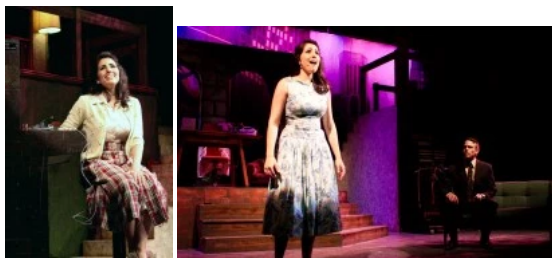
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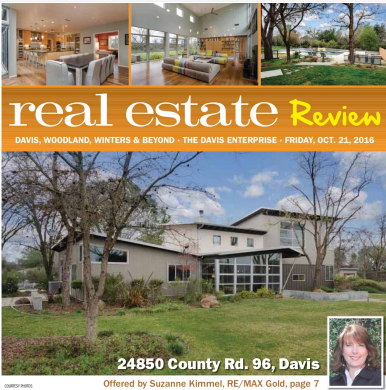
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