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SAN FRANCISCO

by Richard Connema

Klea Blackhurst is "DeLovely" in Cole Porters' Pun-Filled *Red Hot and Blue!*

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42nd Street Moon Company launches its first musical of the 2005-2006 season with Cole Porter's 1936 jazzy musical *Red Hot and Blue!* The season is called "Uncommon Musicals in Concert" and this certainly qualifies for that title. Cole Porter was "Ridin' High" as the darling of the Broadway musical stage in 1936. The musical opened at the Alvin Theatre on October 29 with the stellar cast of Ethel Merman, Jimmy Durante and Bob Hope. Also in the cast were Vivian Vance and Paul Hartman. The show ran 183 performances.

One of the most famous show biz stories came out before the show opened. Neither Ethel Merman nor Jimmy Durante would grant the other star billing so the publicity department devised a plan to arrange their names on an "X" on the poster and print advertisements. Bob Hope was not a big enough name at the time to get star billing. The show got rave reviews from the New York critics.

The musical disappeared after its run in New York until the Goodspeed Opera Company revived the musical in 2000, and it played at the Paper Mill Playhouse in 2001. That production replaced half of the score. However, Artistic Director Greg MacKellen and musical director Dave Dobrusky have restored various bits and songs to present this original version of the musical. Dave has also redone the musical arrangements so what you see is the 1936 version of the musical.

Red Hot and Blue! has some of the master's greatest songs, such as "It's DeLovely," "I've Got My Eyes on You," "Ridin' High" and "Red Hot and Blue." It also has one of cabaret's smartest and most sophisticated songs, "Down in the Depths on the 90th Floor."

Red Hot and Blue! has more puns than any musical this company has presented. The storyline is intangible, involving a running gag about the search for a former sweetheart who has a scar on her cheek - and I don't mean her face. The United States Congress gets involved along with some very funny *Guys and Dolls* types from Sing Sing Prison. Just let logic go out the window and enjoy the singing and puns that had those New Yorkers laughing in 1936.

Klea Blackhurst stars in the flashy Ethel Merman role. Her powerhouse voice matches the great Merman as the rich widow "Nails" O'Reilly Duquesne. She brings down the house in "It's DeLovely," "You're a Bad Influence on Me" and "Red Hot and Blue!". Her "Down in the Depths on the 90th Floor" is soulfully rendered. She is delightful on the acting track with her wonderful malapropisms. No wonder the critics say "she has a voice that could fill an airline terminal."

Steve Rhyne, who has been absent from the stage for almost a year, is a welcome addition playing the romantic interest Bob Hale, Nail's lawyer. Bob Hope played the role in the original and Steve has that young Bob Hope quality about him. The chemistry between Klea and Steve is right on the mark. Steve has great vocal chops on the little known "You've Got Something" and his duet with Klea in "It's DeLovely" is pleasurable. Kalon Thibodeaux (Harpo in *Minnie's Boys* and Dromio in *The Boys from Syracuse*) returns to the Eureka Stage in the Durante role, Policy Pinkle. He is the king of puns; he must have over 100 puns during the two and a half hour production, and some of them are real groaners. This talented young man is becoming more and more like a young Lonny Price and is a great comedy asset to the production. He even does that old vaudeville shtick of playing a defense attorney and a witness at the same time, jumping back and forth with great timing.

Deirdre O'Neil (Broadway and national touring companies of *Grease* and *Hair*) is hilarious as Peaches LaFleur. She plays the role like Vivian Blain in *Guys and Dolls* and you half expect she will break out in "Adelaide's Lament." She is irrepressible singing "I've Got My Eyes on You."

Greg MacKellen has surrounded these top people with some great character singers and actors. Outstanding is Russ Lorensen who plays many roles including the overly fey decorator Reynaldo Descanso. I think he could almost fly off the stage. The female supporting players Tiffany-Marie Austin, Brandy Collazo, Lisa-Marie Newton and Ali McGinnis are all good in harmonizing. Robin Steeves (formerly of the "Lamplighters" and many 42nd Street Productions) gives a smooth performance as Senator Malvinsky. Their male counterparts Ken Baggott, Mike Figueira, Michael Patrick Gaffney and Cameron Weston play various roles, giving good performances. Dave Dobrusky as usual gives great backup on the piano for the singers.

Red Hot and Blue! is playing at the Eureka Theatre, 215 Jackson Street, San Francisco through October 16. For tickets please call Yerba Buena Center for the Arts box office at 415-978-2787. Also visit www.42ndstmoon.org.

42nd St Moon's next production will be Irvin Berlin's *Miss Liberty* opening on October 29 and running through November 13.

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