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THEATER

Milwaukee actor goes for his fourth take on Harpo Marx

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Written by Harry Cherkinian, Contributing writer
Thursday, 11 March 2010 10:11

"A Night at the Opera" can have multiple meanings when it comes to the Skylight Opera Theatre. But in this case, it means the Marx Brothers, Grauman's Chinese Theater, a send-up of Russian writer Anton Chekhov and lots of laughs.

"A Day in Hollywood/A Night in the Ukraine" is comprised of two one-act plays that together were a hit on Broadway 30 years ago. "Day" is a musical tribute to stars from the 1930s, while "Night" inserts the irreverent Marx Brothers into Chekhov's short story "The Bear."

One of those brothers is veteran local performer Ray Jivoff, who plays Harpo, the mute Marx with a curly mop of hair who communicates by whistling or playing a horn. It's the fourth time Jivoff has played the second oldest of the comic foursome – three times in productions at the Skylight and once at Next Act Theatre. All four times, he's performed alongside fellow actor Norman Moses.

Jivoff and his partner C. Michael Wright have lived and worked in Milwaukee since 1988. Jivoff began as education director at the Skylight in 1990 and was named associate artistic director last fall. Wright, himself an accomplished actor, serves as producing artistic director of Milwaukee Chamber Theatre.

The couple met at an opening night party in San Francisco, where Wright was starring in the national tour of Athol Fugard's anti-apartheid tale "Master Harold and the Boys." Initially, the two were a bi-coastal couple, with Wright living in New York City. But they eventually settled together in Milwaukee after Wright was cast in The Milwaukee Rep's "A Christmas Carol."

Having a common profession is a bonding experience for them. "What we talk about a lot is theater," Jivoff says. "People who aren't in this business don't understand the hours and all the hats we wear all the time."


Jivoff's first acting stint in Milwaukee was in the Skylight's 1989 production of "Girl Crazy." Like that show, "Hollywood/Ukraine" features songs from the 1930s in the first half.

But it's the second half, with its slapschtick comedy, that keeps the actor on his toes – and off.


"I fall down a lot running around, I skate on a single roller skate, I ride a bike and fall off, then turn it upside down and go off stage," he says. "Harpo is such a stock character, with his horn and his whistling. I drink the ink from an inkwell. I eat a flower. It's great material and really a lot of fun."



"A Day in Hollywood/A Night in the Ukraine" runs through April 4.



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Working again with Moses adds fuel to the production’s zany atmosphere. “Norman’s so generous and really, really gifted. He really understands the timing,” Jivoff says.

For audiences looking for an evening of laughs and escapism in these trying times, Jivoff sums up the show in one word: “Joy,” he says confidently. “I just think it’s going to be a blast.”

“A Day In Hollywood /A Night in the Ukraine” runs March 12 through April 4 in the Cabot Theatre at the Broadway Theatre Center, 158 N. Broadway. For more information, call 414-291-7800 or visit www.skylightopera.com

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