

The News-Press: Gulf Coasting Live: Arts

Checkmate — ‘Chess’ musical takes people back to Cold War

by Charles Runnells

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TheatreZone’s latest show may be about the game of chess, but it’s also about a whole lot more: communism, the Cold War, espionage, love and obsession. You name it. “The chess game is mostly a metaphor for how people are used as pawns, says director Mark Danni. “And how they (the USSR) would get people to think the way they wanted them to think.” It’s a heavy subject, but the musical “Chess” balances that with a bouncy score by Broadway lyricist Tim Rice and two members of the Swedish pop group ABBA. Remember the ’80’s hit “One Night in Bangkok”? It’s from this show. “The score is so phenomenal,” says actor Larry Alexander, who plays Russian chess master Anatoly Sergievsky in this version. He played the same role in the first touring production of “Chess” in the late ’80s. “All theater people just love this score,” he says. “Chess” plays Thursday through Sunday at The G&L Theatre at The Community School of Naples. Like the Soviet Union, “Chess” has had a tumultuous history. It started out as an album, then became a successful London show, then bombed on Broadway, then triumphed on a national tour. Since then, “Chess” has grown a cult reputation for its cloak-and-dagger plot and songs that embrace everything from pop and rock to opera and musical theater. The show certainly fits TheatreZone’s mission of salvaging those “lost treasures of Broadway”: shows that aren’t performed very often, but should be. “People rarely do it,” Danni says, “probably because it’s so difficult. Especially musically. “You need three people who have a lot of stamina and a lot of range. Plus the music can be very rhythmically difficult. “And on top of that, you have to be able to act.” “Chess” is loosely based on the dramatic 1972 match between Soviet world chess champion Boris Spassky and American challenger Bobby Fischer. The Icelandic event quickly became more than a board game: It was a clash of cultures. The musical recasts Spassky and Fisher as Sergievsky and Freddie Trumper (played by Broadway veteran Jason Kraack). And it shows how both men are pushed and pulled by power politics. “It became about communism versus democracy,” Danni says. “Not who was going to win the match.” If you didn’t live through the Cold War, it’s hard to understand the deep tensions and distrust between those two countries. “Chess” brings it all back to life. Alexander saw what communism had done to Berlin when he toured Europe in the late ’80s. “It was like being in a grey world,” he says. “The people were grey. The buildings were grey, Everything was grey. “It was really bizarre.” Then he came back a few years later, after the Wall had fallen. And suddenly there was color everywhere. And people were smiling. “Everything was different,” he says. “It was amazing.” “Chess” underlines how much things have changed in Berlin and the rest of the world. “It made me remember things,” Danni says. “It made me think, ‘Oh my God, remember when we used to be so suspicious of the Soviets?’ It’s just not like that anymore.”