

Review: **'Mack & Mabel' get TheatreZone started right** | Naples Daily News
By Maxine Ginsberg, Saturday, March 18, 2006

There's a new kid on the local theatrical block by the name of TheatreZone. The new arrival strutted its stuff for the first time Thursday night with its production of "Mack & Mabel." This first of four performances at the Community School's G&L Theater gave the opening night audience a fictional close-up of two pioneers of the movie industry, Mack Sennett and Mabel Normand, and a real encounter with a celebrity of modern-day show business, Gary Sandy. The venue is a pleasant surprise. The 250-seat auditorium has been constructed with an amphitheater-style slope that ensures a good view of the stage from every seat. The cozy space helps establish intimacy with the actors and boosts the audience's involvement with the play. The play presented is a drama unto itself. Though it only ran for six months when it opened on Broadway in 1974, Jerry Herman, its composer and lyricist, calls it his favorite work — this from the man who wrote "Hello, Dolly!" and "Mame". Some blame its early demise on the age difference between its Broadway portrayals, Robert Preston and Bernadette Peters, while others point out that the main characters, Sennett and Normand, aren't exactly America's sweethearts. But the show was resuscitated, first when its overture was used by gold medal skaters in the 1984 Olympics, and demand for the music exploded, and then 11 years later, when a writing revision made the tale more likable. And a likable show it is, as it chronicles not only the romance of a waitress-turned-movie star and her movie-mad director, but the early days of silent films and the history of Sennett's Keystone two-reelers. There's a reason why Herman dotes on this work. The lyrics are delicious — who'd have thought of rhyming bagels and knishes with St. Aloysius? The audience needs to pay attention to every phrase to fully appreciate the wit, but that's a task made easier by the intimacy of the hall and the talent of the cast. Gary Sandy, as Sennett, erases all traces of his best-known TV character, Andy Travis, the station manager of "WKRP in Cincinnati." He brings to his performance a voice that's easy on the ears and an easy stage presence born of years in television soap operas and musicals and dramas on the legitimate stage. Sandy segues skillfully from the reminiscing old Sennett to the brash young showman scrambling to make a buck. His inherent likeability softens a character who is more rascal than hero, more devil than saint. Susan Nock likewise puts Normand's best foot forward. The feisty Brooklynite makes some dubious choices in Tinsel Town, but Nock's sweet demeanor and high-voltage voice have the audience rooting for her all through the night. The leads get ample support from a lively cast. Karen Molnar, as Lottie, is especially winning in the tap dance number. Robert Nardi and David Goguen contribute as a writer and director respectively. Director Mark Danni has elicited energetic performances from the ensemble. Ann Shuttlesworth and her four-member orchestra delivered spirited musical support. The founders of TheatreZone, a not-for-profit organization with Actors Equity status, plan to stage what they term "Broadway's lost treasures". "Mack & Mabel" certainly qualifies. The romance, though cliché, still resonates with audiences. The play reflects the early days of an industry still hugely significant in modern times. The songs, though far from classics, are impressive. And the pared-down concert format illustrates that a good cast more than compensates for lots of scenery and costumes. The 90-minute production — though sound glitches and line lapses made it less than perfect on opening night — delighted the audience, as might be expected. Theater lovers always appreciate good material well presented.