

# Review: TheatreZone's production of 'Nine' scores nearly a 10

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Friday night's TheatreZone production of "Nine," the musical successor to filmmaker Federico Fellini's "8½," was a rollicking and entertaining success. The show played to a nearly full house, drew numerous rounds of applause after individual numbers and earned a solid and well-deserved ovation at the end.

"Nine" opened on Broadway in 1982 and won five Tonys. It has since seen two revivals and plans are afoot for a feature film version from the producers of "Chicago."

"Nine" is the story of bedeviled director Guido Contini, his crisis of confidence while trying to think of a subject for his next film and the troubles he faces while juggling the harem of women in his life.

The quality of the acting and singing was almost uniformly excellent. The entire female cast should be saluted for their work as individuals and as a group for portraying the women in Guido Contini's life.

Two actresses deserve special praise. Karen Molnar brought class, gravitas and genuine emotion to the role of cuckolded wife Luisa. The sadness, acceptance and yes, love in her voice as she sings to a pack of gossip-hungry reporters during "My Husband Makes Movies" is nearly heartbreaking.

Meg Pryor delivered a sizzling scene-stealing turn as the busty Sarraghina, a lusty, tantalizing seductress who initiates the young Guido into the mysteries of life during a show-stopping number, "Ti Voglio/ Be Italian."

Her rich performance imbued a role that could easily have been a trite comedic caricature into an emotional powerhouse. Pryor also demonstrated her versatility by donning a blonde wig and a towel to play the fictional version of Carla in the show's movie within a play.

The Spartan set — essentially just a series of steps — served to highlight the voices and movement of the actors. The second half featured no stage dressing at all, just a few props.

One quibble: From my seat I could see the orchestra lights through the large stylized Roman painting. It proved to be a distraction throughout the show. The painting contributed little if anything to the setting and could have been replaced by a full backdrop with no loss to the show.

What the stripped-down set did was force the attention of the viewers onto the actors and the relationships between the characters.

The staging had nearly the entire female cast entering from the upper stage and thus addressing the hapless Guido nearly always at a lower level from a position of relative authority. I found this an interesting device that constantly served to remind viewers of the power that the women in Guido's life held.

Actress Karen Molnar, who played Luisa, doubled as the choreographer. The dance numbers were entertaining if not particularly imaginative. The “Folies Bergeres” number and particularly actresses Victoria Regan and Jane Badger made good use of the different levels of the stage, as did “The Grand Canal” number.

The overture, which introduces the entire female cast, was impressive in both style and design. A nod goes to the show's costume designer Kathleen Kolacz for dressing the cast in such a unified palette of black with touches of white, silver and beige. The combined effect was stunning and the outfits suited the characters perfectly.

There were a couple false notes. Larry Alexander has a wonderful voice - a voice meant for Broadway. On the strength of his voice alone, I'd cast him in any number of musicals — albeit ones meant for non-Italians. He can act and he can sing but he failed to make me believe that he's a middle-aged Italian director who managed to land a wife and two girlfriends. Physically, I just don't think that the actor was right for the part he was being asked to play.

Of the large female cast, it's possible that Dana Cohen's superb stage presence outshines her vocal ability. Her saucy sexpot Carla delighted audiences, especially in the “Call from the Vatican” scene, but her voice simply wasn't up to the demands made of it - tending more toward the shrill than the melodic. The comedy chops are definitely there - when I first saw her I thought of a younger Sarah Jessica Parker - but the voice isn't.

Despite the few wrong notes, “Nine,” which ran through Saturday, was a fantastically entertaining evening. If this were Hollywood, I'd be hoping for the sequel “Ten.”