

TheatreZone opens its season with sexy Nine

By Carla Meekins

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TheatreZone, Naples' professional Equity regional theatre company, opened its season of Broadway revivals with a sexy, surreal musical; *Nine*.

Five performances were staged in the intimate G & L Theatre on the campus of the Community School, from Nov. 29 to Dec. 1. In an equity theater, a percentage of the cast and staff in any production must be members of the Actors' Equity Association, so Neapolitans get the opportunity to see Broadway talent without flying to New York.

Raymond LeCatta, president of the Naples Italian American Club, and his wife, Joyce, attend TheatreZone productions with other members of the club. He said, "We love to come on opening night. We like the performances; they always do a great job. There's camaraderie among the people who like this kind of theatre. That's part of the draw and it's wonderful."

Written by Arthur Kopit, the Tony award-winning play, *Nine*, is based on Federico Fellini's film, *8 1/2* about a once-acclaimed filmmaker's slow descent into a nervous breakdown. Guido Contini, a famous filmmaker at a loss as to what to do for his next film, whisks himself off to a Venetian spa to unblock his creative energy.

Suddenly, the divisions between art and reality blur. The women he has used and abused drift in and out of his life, in dreamlike sequences. The guilt and self-doubt finally lead him to an ego-driven concept for the movie. As his film takes shape, it all too easily resembles his own life, at which point his real life begins to crumble. Contini considers suicide.

This all was portrayed through entertaining song and dance routines on a simple, stark set. The musical score by Maury Yeston was satirical, operatic and kitschy. Larry Alexander, with New York theatre credits which include *Les Miserables*, *Party* and *The Wizard of Oz*, played Guido Contini.

At first, it was hard to accept the slender, graceful Alexander as the Felliniesque Casanova. His Italian accent was inconsistent and sounded more like he was from Little Italy than Italy. Ultimately, Alexander did portray the conflicted Contini honestly and with gusto.

The staging of a TheatreZone production is rendered at an accelerated pace. Alexander said, "We had eight days of rehearsal. Our opening night is our ninth performance." He continued, "It's crazy, but I'm used to it. I stepped into *Les Miserables* in just four days."

Karen Molnar, with a list of numerous theatre, film and television credits, played Contini's wife, the ever-suffering Luisa and her acting talent showed. She also served as the production's choreographer.

Dana Cohen sizzled on stage as Contini's mistress, Carla. Among the many songs she sang was the bawdy *A Call from the Vatican*, that left some males in the audience wriggling in their seats. Kay Francis played Contini's mother, delivering some great moments, especially a soulful and emotionally moving rendition of the title song.

At one point, Meg Pryor, as the salacious Sarraghina, suggestively sings to a young Contini, played by seventh-grader Mark Allen, and a group of young schoolboys, portrayed by Edward Allen, Howard Murrell, Noah Samotin and Zachary Tretter. One woman in the audience remarked, "I feel sorry for those little boys, to be subjected to such lascivious singing."



The cast of the Tony-award winning musical, *Nine*, surrounds Larry Alexander, who portrays a Fellini-esque womanizer, Guido Contini.

Her husband immediately responded, "I think they have it great!"

The cast also included Charleene Closshey, Victoria Regan, Jane Badger, Dawn Lebrecht, Mary Benepe-Sytsma, Laura Lynn Needle, and Jane Armstrong. The music director was Charles Fornara. John Daniele designed the set.

Mark Danni is a journeyman director, and you can count on him to deliver a professional production. This is why I'm looking forward to TheatreZone's next offering, *Leader of the Pack*, on Jan. 10.

The Broadway musical celebrates the life and times of Ellie Greenwich, who wrote pop hits like *Be My Baby*, *Chapel of Love*, *Da-Do-Ron-Ron* and *Then He Kissed Me*. That production features Karen Gray Cipriani, lead singer of the 60s girl group, *The Secrets* and it promises to rock!

TheatreZone's G & L Theatre is located at the Community School of Naples. For more information, call 451-0215 or visit www.theatrezoneflorida.com.

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