

Neapolitan: 'Stepping Out' taps comedic gold

By CHRIS SILK (Contact) 5:36 p.m., Friday, January 9, 2009 Naples Daily News

If you go

"Stepping Out"

What: Hilarious comedy about a motley crew of would-be tappers trying to conquer their fear of achievement in a dingy church hall

When: 8 p.m. Jan. 10, 14, 15, 16 & 17 and 2 p.m. Jan. 10, 11 & 18.

Where: G&L Theatre on the campus of Community School of Naples, 13275 Livingston Road, Naples

Cost: \$35-\$40

Information: 888-966-3352 or theatrezone-florida.com

A lovable crew of syncopated steppers, led by Tony Award winner Donna McKechnie, shuffled right into audience members' hearts Thursday night as TheatreZone's tap dance comedy "Stepping Out" debuted at the G&L Theatre on the Community School of Naples campus.

"Stepping Out" is prolific British writer Richard Harris' deceptively simple tale about the seven women (and one man) who meet for weekly dance classes in a dingy church hall. The play isn't really about tap dancing; it is about family, even if this "family" is only together for one hour a week and has little else in common. The central message of the play is essentially that "no (wo)man is an island" — no matter how alone you may think you are.

Personalities seem at first glance to come straight from Central Casting and run the gamut from a stressed out med student to a shy sparrow of a career woman to brash, mouthy and loutish blue-collar housewives. Even the instructor is a faded wannabe star who never made it out of the chorus. Personalities and

quirks reveal themselves bit by bit each week as the class prepares for a performance at a local charity event.

“Stepping Out” has had many lives. The play debuted on the West End in 1984 and was a hit there but ran for only 73 performances on Broadway in early 1987. Liza Minelli headlined a 1991 movie version; “Stepping Out: The Musical” opened in London in 1996, lasting more than two years and spawning a soundtrack album.

Danni’s version is the plain and simple “play” (alas, no musical here) — but there’s nothing simple about it. McKechnie is glamorous, if a bit more subdued than I expected as faded star-turned-teacher Mavis, although she still has the moves. Even approaching her seventh decade, she proves as lithe and acrobatic as ever on the stage; her dance solo was a pleasure to watch.

The real star of the show is the ensemble. The cast meshes seamlessly and flows into different combinations with such ease that at least nine individual story threads all weave together into a coherent whole — a credit to Danni’s directing. The people and their interactions are the heart of this work — and he made sure to highlight that.

It is nearly impossible to pick a favorite from among the bevy of talented women, but Jane Badger (Andy) arguably does more with less as a quiet, sparrow-voiced woman trying to find her internal strength. Badger manages to telegraph hints of her buried hurts in frightened looks, tentative stares and fragile-as-glass mannerisms long before her sad plight is revealed to the audience.

Other standouts include the always-excellent Meg Pryor (Sylvia), cast here as a gum-popping, wise-cracking loudmouth. Pryor gets many of the first act’s funniest lines and doesn’t fail to

deliver, showing the comic skills she's honed with downtown comedy troupe Naples City Improv. Kimberly Dawn Smith (Vera) nearly steals the show in a comic moment involving the most hideous pair of silver tights known to man (one among many of costumer Kathleen Kolacz's fanciful creations). Her character's unexpected cathartic moment is beautifully handled and devastatingly powerful.

If I could make a few changes, I'd add one more scene to tie up a few loose ends in the plot — many of the characters' stories seem to be left hanging as the story fast-forwards toward a conclusion. While much of the physical comedy (the pratfalls, the intentionally bad tapping) is perfect, Danni also needs to punch up the timing and delivery of the jokes in places — particularly the opening scene.

The closing tap number — the show's payoff, so to speak — seems rather short (even if it is nicely choreographed, nod to Karen Molnar in a dual role). Given that the whole play is about people learning to tap dance, I'd like to see some more tapping.

"Stepping Out" proves a delightfully pleasant experience. The cast is a joy to watch in action and the still-has-it McKechnie proves a dash of glamour.

*I'm stepping out with my baby, can't go wrong cos' I'm in right.
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