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A 'Funny Thing' at the STC

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The farce "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum" runs like a well-maintained machine. That's what farces do, and the new production of the 1962 Tony Award-winning comic musical at Sacramento Theatre Company hums with efficiency. At the center of the production, Michael RJ Campbell, as the constantly scheming slave Pseudolus, supplies the necessary energy to keep the ridiculously complicated plot spinning. Campbell has always been a larger-than-life actor with a full, warm singing voice, and the bustling, hustling, gag-filled Pseudolus feels written for him.

The part originally was written for the comedian Phil Silvers, who declined, allowing Zero Mostel to originate the role and win a Tony Award for his performance. Silvers did play the role 10 years later, winning his own Tony for the character, who ironically has no morals but the purest of motives. Set in ancient Rome 200 years before Christ and derived from the farces of the ancient Roman playwright Plautus (254-184 BC), the production has Pseudolus as a slave in the house of Senex with one desire - to some way, any way, gain his freedom.

After the opening prologue of the memorable classic "Comedy Tonight," Pseudolus sets the plot in motion with a scam that continually rolls over on itself. The young master of the house, Hero (Matt Surges), has fallen in love with a young woman he's seen in the window of the house next door. Pseudolus tells Hero he will help him get together with her if Hero will free him.

Hero agrees, but numerous complications make the arrangement unlikely. The young woman Philia (played opening night by **Megan Odell** but also played by Meghan Greene) is a virgin courtesan from the House of Lycus, a buyer and seller of courtesans. Philia has already been sold to the great warrior Miles Gloriosus (the wonderfully blustery Jacob L. Smith) who is on his way to claim her.

Adding to the complications - because that's how farce works - Hero's parents, who had gone away to the country, return early. Joe Vincent as Senex and Lenore Sebastian as his wife, Domina, add solid comic turns. Though the pre-recorded music often sounds canned and artificial, **the singing throughout the cast is first-rate with Smith and Odell particularly standing out, along with Campbell.** The clever parade of courtesans featuring Lindsay Kristine Anderson, Jennifer Martin, Andrea St. Clair and Renee DeGarmo during "The House of Lycus" showed Campbell at his comic best, while Scottie Woodard as the aptly named Hysterium made a solid colleague in high jinks for Pseudolus.

Stephen Sondheim wrote the music and lyrics, with the book written by Burt Shevelove and Larry Gelbart. In many ways their creation reeks of the time it was written with its crude, ogling sexist humor forming the backbone of the show. Yet nothing in this show can or should be taken too seriously, and director Michael Laun emphasizes the general entertaining silliness of the work.

Call The Bee's Marcus Crowder, (916) 321-1120. Follow him on Twitter @maruscrowder.

A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO THE FORUM *** What: The Tony-winning 1962 farce with songs by Stephen Sondheim and a book by Burt Shevelove and Larry Gelbart tells the story of a Roman slave who will do anything to win his freedom. When: 6:30 p.m. Wednesdays and Thursdays, 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, 2 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays, 12:30 p.m. Thursdays through May 18. Where: The Sacramento Theatre Company, Main Stage, 1419 H St., Sacramento. Tickets: \$15-\$38. Information: (916) 443-6722; www.sactheatre.org Time: Two hours and 20 minutes, including one intermission.