

ARTS &
LIVING

‘Scoundrels’ ends season on high note

By Doug Norris

Features Editor

MATUNUCK — Theatre By The Sea has a knack for sending summer out in comic style. For the third straight August, audiences will leave the old barn laughing, after another stellar musical production that blends slapstick, verbal humor, sight gags, clever lyrics, raunchy repartee and the odd groaner of a pun into a thoroughly enjoyable theatrical cocktail.

Continuing the momentum built by last summer’s “The Producers” and 2007’s only curtain-raiser, “A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum,” “Dirty Rotten Scoundrels” is a superbly cast, acted and directed production.



REVIEW

The Tony Award-winning musical, more familiar to many patrons as a film starring Michael Caine and Steve Martin, features witty lyrics and bouncy music by David Yazbek and a wonderfully silly book, complete with elaborate scams and

plot twists, by Jeffrey Lane.

It’s the story of two con men – Lawrence Jameson, who has made a career of scamming rich women of their money and jewels from his villa in the French Riviera, and Freddy Benson, a drifter, grifter and scalawag, eager to up his game in learning the tricks of the trade. While they trade barbs about their age, experience and class, the two men realize that they share a passion for the art of the con. But soon their competitive natures get the best of them, and they find themselves vying for the affections and fortunes of the same woman.

Out of that simple premise erupts humor from every direction as events spiral out of control and plans go awry. Director Amiee Turner amps up the laughter by establishing a pace that is fast but not frenetic and allows every visual and verbal joke to find its own level. By combining the over-the-top elements of the show with several scenes in which the humor is understated, Turner allows each character to discover moments that work for them on stage and manages just the right balance of comedy and sentiment.

Al Bundonis as Lawrence and Jason Gillman as Freddy are the perfect foils, exhibiting exquisite comic timing and reveling in their rivalry as Lawrence’s emphasis on charm, wit and savoir faire clashes with Gillman’s ruder brand of con. Rachel Rice is a riot as Jolene Oaks, the Oklahoma husband-huntin’, varmint-killin’ oil heiress who wants to rope Lawrence as her third groom. Lisa Yuen gives a quirky, funny performance as the charmingly klutzy but kind Christine Colgate, the object of both Lawrence and Freddy’s affections. Christopher Swan as Andre and Stacey Geer as Muriel have several funny moments together and separately, and their second-act scene on the balcony is a masterpiece of deadpan comedy.

Musical and comedic highlights abound, from the



Jason Gillman as Freddy dreams of French maids and more in the song “Great Big Stuff,” one of the many highlights in Theatre By The Sea’s production of “Dirty Rotten Scoundrels,” playing through Sept. 6 in Matunuck.

opening set-up number “Give Them What They Want,” featuring Lawrence, Andre and the ensemble to the slow-burn “What Was a Woman To Do,” sung by Muriel, which turns comically into a tale of jilted mistresses.

Gillman gets to show off his comic versatility in the crowd-pleasing “Great Big Stuff.” A send-up of “Oklahoma” (not the one we all know and love) provides another uproarious scene. But the stars of the show in many ways are the scams, as evident in the hysterical scene that includes the number “All About Ruprecht,” in which Freddy plays Lawrence’s disturbed, basement-dwelling brother.

Another con, in which Freddy pretends to be a poor, unloved, wheelchair-ridden soldier with a mental disease that leaves him numb from the waist down, which can only be cured by legendary psychiatrist Dr. Shuffhausen, becomes even more farcical when Lawrence shows up as the famed German doctor. Later Freddy and Christine combine for a ridiculously funny duet in “Love is My Legs.”

Overall, the sets are impressive, the orchestra is exceptional, and the ensemble is equally strong, featured regularly in colorful and lively dance sequences, choreographed by Chris Saunders and costumed by Marcia Zammarelli.

Technically, there were a few minor

glitches. The staircase rolling in from stage right (from the audience’s perspective) seemingly missed its mark on occasion, leading to a couple of clunky scene transitions. And lighting was an issue at times. In one scene, Freddy ad-libbed that Christine’s hotel room seemed dark. In another, the lights just ran the gamut of problems.

But none of the technical snafus distracted from the audience’s enjoyment of the play. “Scoundrels” offers something for everyone, including moments of great verbal humor (“Breeding is important but lighting is everything”), throwaway sight gags (Andre trying to light a cigarette, Freddy in a runaway wheelchair) and several self-referential bits that break down the fourth wall. (At one point, when the plot takes an odd turn, Lawrence asks the audience: “Did I miss a scene?”)

Two of the biggest audience laughs on opening night were prompted by a lyric that pokes fun at the 43rd president and a delightfully unexpected locality lumped in with the likes of China and Iceland.

If you go, and you should, you’ll have your own favorite joke or routine to savor. At the end of the evening, you may even envy the life of a scoundrel.

Theatre By the Sea, located at 364 Card’s Pond Road in Matunuck, will perform “Dirty Rotten Scoundrels” through Sept. 6. Call 782-8587 for tickets.