

'Screwball Comedy' at The Public Theatre dazzles with great cast

BY ROB TUKEY - SPECIAL TO THE SUN JOURNAL
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A small, talented group of actors create big laughs in this take on the classic screwball comedies of the past.

"Screwball Comedy" by Norm Foster, now playing at The Public Theater in Lewiston, isn't fooling around.

The title serves as more than just the definition of the genre. It is a master class in the formula popularized in the Depression era of the 1930s. And this clinic in comedy is delivered by four exceptional actors in a breath-taking tour de force that is marvelous to behold. See it in person and then, I'd recommend, see it again online. There is too much here to be appropriately appreciated in one viewing.

What distinguishes screwball comedy apart from the generic romantic comedy is that it satirizes the traditional romantic comedy. Where romantic comedy highlights love, screwball comedies tend to be a spoof of love, employing fast-paced, overlapping dialogue, farcical situations, a physical battle of the sexes, and disguise or masquerade. The plot lines involving courtship and marriage are taken to ridiculous and absurd heights.

This delightfully funny play, set in 1937, is a compendium of all the trademarks of a screwball comedy. Ripped straight from scripts of "The Philadelphia Story," "His Girl Friday" and "My Man Godfrey," the plot is sort of familiar but who cares? Replete with wonderful period cultural references ("What in the name of Bronco Nagusky...?"), the rapid dialogue is a river of running gags, a tsunami of similes and a mirthful mashup of mixed-up metaphors. Add a deluge of dubious double entendres and you have an evening of non-stop humor.

Directed by Executive/Artistic Director Christopher Schario, The Public Theatre's version is powered by a delightful and eminently talented cast of four (well, five if we count a quirky canine with the hilariously misapplied name "Lucky"). The sparkling performances from each actor capture the whirlwind comings and goings of seven zany characters who interact with a mismatched couple who are destined to fall in love.

Actors Mike Anthony and Jessica DiGiovanni are wonderful as foils for the wacky characters that surround them. Anthony and DiGiovanni play Jeff Kincaid and Mary Hayes: He is a slightly dimming star reporter for The Chronicle who lately is more interested in womanizing than reporting; she is a neophyte hoping to secure a cub reporter position with the newspaper. Their sexual tension is played to comedic perfection as the "battle of the sexes" aspect of a screwball comedy.

With the skill of tennis players, they volley snappy insults with spirit as their characters find themselves inexplicably drawn to each other. Their running joke is that when he doesn't understand what she says,



Heather Dilly and Mike Anthony in Screwball Comedy

he thinks it has sexual connotations, while she professes to have a mind like a steel trap but can't remember any detail from a conversation.

But the spotlight belongs to Danny Vaccaro and Heather Dilly, who inhabit the remaining seven denizens of this screwball world. We first meet them playing "Bosco" Godfrey, the hard-boiled editor of the aforementioned newspaper *The Chronicle*, and Jonesy, his wise-cracking New Yawkah secretary.

Bosco decides to pit Kincaid's reputation as a reporter against Hayes' determination to become one, competing in a task, Bosco hopes, will allow him to fulfill a directive from

the newspaper's owner, Dolores Diddle. Diddle, played by Dilly, wants a reporter to feign an interview with her lazy, spoiled, dim-witted son Chauncey and his glittering fiancé Gloria Fontana to prove Gloria is a gold-digger with eyes more for the family fortune than for Chauncey.

Off to the Diddle estate we go, where Kincaid and Hayes encounter Vaccaro again, now as Reginald the butler, who is deliciously supercilious, condescending and sarcastic. He soon withdraws to announce their arrival to Dolores Diddle, who enters, garish and overly upper crust. She holds court in hilarious fashion and explains her dilemma. Next to arrive is Peter Terwilliger, played again by Vaccaro, a fawningly flamboyant paramour to the recently widowed Dolores. He commands the stage with hilarious exuberance.

A scheme emerges in which Kincaid and Hayes will divide and conquer: Hayes will interview Chauncey while Kincaid will charm Gloria. His machismo approach will serve to seduce her, thereby revealing her lack of fidelity to Chauncey while demonstrating to the dubious Hayes his seduction techniques. Hayes, still determined to match Kincaid at his own game, plans to use similar tactics on Chauncey. Practicing her approach with Kincaid only adds to the romantic confusion in their budding and stormy relationship.

Kincaid's interview with Gloria, the gilded siren played by, yes, Dilly, appears to fail at every turn, ultimately involving several twists and turns.

Hayes' interaction with Chauncey — Vaccaro yet again — becomes a game-changer in all the plans and schemes. The turnabout interview prompts an unexpected revelation involving Chauncey that is both humorous and poignant.

Lastly, in a nod to the classic comedy mystery "The Thin Man," foul play is uncovered and secret liaisons are revealed.

The wonder in all this hubbub is that, except for the superb portrayals by Mike Anthony and Jessica DiGiovanni as Jeff Kincaid and Mary Hayes, all other parts are played to magnificent and comedic excellence by the other two fine actors, Dilly and Vaccaro. The pace is so hectic that I am almost convinced, against the raw logic of it, that I actually saw more than four people on stage at any one time. And the transformation of Vaccaro and Dilly from one role to another is so uncanny and convincing that one finds it impossible to recognize them as the same actors. That, alone, is well worth the price of admission.



Jessica DiGiovanni, Mike Anthony and Danny Vaccaro in Screwball Comedy