

Star power: Louise Pitre lights up Goodspeed's "Mame"



Louise Pitre leads the way in the "It's Today!" number that opens Goodspeed's "Mame."

Published May 15, 2012 12:01AM

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"You've made us feel alive again/

You've given us the drive again ..."

Those lyrics are tough descriptions for an actress to live up to. Mame has to be extraordinary in "Mame," and the performer who plays the title character can either make or break the whole enterprise.

The happy news for Goodspeed Musicals' productions is it stars a firecracker named Louise Pitre.

The Canadian actress - who originated the lead role in Broadway's "Mamma Mia!" and earned a Tony nomination in the process - infuses Mame with her own boisterous sense of joie de vivre. As soon as she steps on stage, atop an elegant art deco staircase, she owns the joint. She exudes Mame's confidence, flamboyance and humor, and yet she's also able to bring a soft emotionality to her more sensitive scenes with Mame's 10-year-old nephew. (In this story, which Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee based on Patrick Dennis's novel, the unsinkable Mame teaches the orphan about life as she leads him through tough times and good times over the course of two decades.)

Since "Mame" has a wonderful score - it's arguably Jerry Herman's strongest - the lead actress also must be a superior singer. Pitre measures up. Her smoky voice wraps itself around "If He Walked Into My Life" and fires up "It's Today."

She looks great, too. Every Mame deserves a Carrie-Bradshaw-sized closet of drop-dead dresses, and Pitre gets her chic share. Designer Gregg Barnes drapes her in a fuchsia velvet gown dotted with dramatic embroidery and provides her perfectly tailored winter-white ensembles. (Mame's intentionally-fashion-don't "Southern" dress is a riot - pink flounces everywhere, and a hat so big it could shade all of Mississippi.) As with other costumes in the shows, Mame's outfits tend to glitter under the stage lights. Glam, baby, glam.

If Pitre is Goodspeed's luminous star, she has a bright satellite in Kirsten Wyatt as the mousy Agnes Gooch, the nanny for Mame's nephew. Wyatt shows herself to be a primo physical comedienne. Her hugely pregnant Gooch sinks with cumbersome awkwardness into a couch. She galumphs upstairs and cries, with hiccupy emphasis as she hits each step.

Wyatt squeezes out her lines in a Lisa Simpson voice and squints her eyes as if Agnes just can't believe what weirdness she sees out in the world. Wyatt may affect a nasally, juvenile speaking voice for the character, but she shows her real stuff when she stretches out into aria perfection for high notes in the show-stopping "Gooch's Song."

Those two performances provide the high points in Goodspeed's "Mame." The rest of the show, directed by Ray Roderick, is snazzy and jazzy but does run into stumbling blocks here and there. The comedy can be played in too heavy handed a manner, whether with the outre operators of a nail salon or the teeth-clenching blue bloods of a Connecticut family.



Making a grand entrance: Pitre in "Mame."

And the first act feels a little meandering, as the real conflict doesn't kick in until after intermission.

Goodspeed has two fine young actors playing Mame's nephew, Patrick. Eli Baker is all boyish charm as the 10-year-old Patrick, with no trace of child-star artificiality, and the appealing Charles Hagerty captures in the older Patrick someone who is still finding his way as an adult.

James Lloyd Reynolds shares a nice chemistry with Pitre as Mame's love, a true Southern gentleman.

"Mame" looks fabulous, whether it's the costumes, the set by James Youmans, or the dances choreographed by Vince Pesce. Infusing the opening number, the 1920s-flapper-inspired "It's Today," with such ball-of-fire pizzazz is a perfect way to start off a show.

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