

'Carousel' hits modern audiences hard

PLAY REVIEW, By Dean Poling, The Valdosta Daily Times. Thursday, June 9, 2011.

VALDOSTA — Billy Bigelow faces big problems in "Carousel." He's unemployed. He's a newlywed. He has a baby on the way.

But it is his temper that may get him in trouble with modern Peach State Summer Theatre audiences. Though it happens off stage, Billy hits his pretty, young wife, Julie.

On learning that he struck Julie, some audience members audibly gasped on opening night. These audience members were apparently unfamiliar with the storyline of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein's 1945 musical.

That or, more likely, social mores have changed in the past 66 years. The idea of a man striking his wife or any woman has become socially repellent. Jackie Gleason's beloved Ralph Kramden made a classic catch phrase of punching his wife, Alice, to the moon. Such a line wouldn't work as comedy nowadays. Instead, it would be viewed as a threat of domestic violence.

So, even though Billy Bigelow finds his place in heaven, he likely has a tougher time finding a place in the hearts of a 21st century audience.

That said, Kyle Downing works hard to find that spot. Downing plays Billy with the necessary brash and bluster in the PSST! production. He seeks Billy's redemption in the moments Bigelow falls in love with Julie Jordan and realizes they will soon have a child. Downing brings Billy's unexpected joy and concerns to life.

He is joined by a more than able cast.

In Julie Jordan, Hillary Smith finds touches of a young Shirley Jones, who played the character in the movie adaptation of "Carousel." She has a splendid voice. She and Downing spend an extensive and exciting interlude on stage together as they try not to fall for each other, but their love is too strong. Smith invests a fragile innocence into Julie while retaining an underlying strength of faith that Billy can be redeemed.

Laura Wright follows a memorable performance as the title character in last fall's Valdosta State University Theatre & Dance's production of "Sweet Charity" with a fun performance as Carrie Pipperidge, Julie's friend who loves Enoch Snow.

Michael Elliott makes a much-welcome return to the stage as Enoch Snow. He has a singing voice as clear as crystal. He also reveals a fine-tuned sense of comic timing.

Sara DelBeato captures hearts and worthy praise as Nettie Fowler. She has a voice that can belt out a big, foot-tapping production number like "June Is Bustin' Out All Over" then stir hearts with "Carousel's" powerful "You'll Never Walk Alone." You may have heard "You'll Never Walk Alone" a thousand times by a hundred different famous singers, but Sara DelBeato will break your heart and soothe your soul singing this tune within the context of the show.

Eric Brandt Nielsen creates a rhythmic performance with his choreography. He creates a tremendously moving tableau with "The Carousel Ballet," featuring Hannah Trowell as the Bigelows' daughter and Tim Olivar as Carnival Boy. Nielsen shares again his ability to tell a story through the art of putting one foot in front of the other. Trowell and Olivar had the audience applauding several times during the dance.

As she has on so many occasions in the past, Jacque Wheeler directs "Carousel" with a poet's soul and a choreographer's eye. She keeps this show moving physically and emotionally. Joined by brilliant set designs, lighting, and sound, along with colorful costumes and a live orchestra, Wheeler creates a memorable opener for a new PSST! season.

Still, there will be those who won't have the heart to forgive Billy Bigelow's indiscretions. And given "Carousel's" message of redemption, maybe this show has always been aimed more at those who won't forgive rather than those who need forgiving.

Peach State Summer Theatre's "Carousel" continues 7:30 p.m. June 11; 3 p.m. June 12; 3 p.m. June 19 June 19, June 26; 7:30 p.m. June 30, July 2, July 6, July 8; 3 p.m. July 10; 7:30 p.m. July 12, July 16, Sawyer Theatre, VSU Fine Arts Building, corner of Oak and Brookwood. Other shows: PSST opens Disney's "The Jungle Book," 7:30 p.m. June 17, and Hairspray, 7:30 p.m., June 24. These shows then run in rotating repertory theatre with "Carousel" through mid-July. More information on any or all of these shows, tickets, season tickets, etc.: Visit www.valdosta.edu/psst; or call (229) 259-7770.