
The Bulletin

Philadelphia's Family Newspaper

Weekend Arts & Culture Guide

Temple Celebrates Life, Love And 40 Years Of Drama

by Mallory Politz, for *The Bulletin*

11/16/2007



Philadelphia - Temple University's Theater Department celebrates its 40th anniversary this season with a restaging of William Saroyan's "The Time of Your Life."

Temple first presented the Pulitzer Prize-winning play in 1967, during its inaugural season. Mr. Saroyan's timeless masterpiece is a grand way to celebrate Temple's contributions to the Philadelphia theater community.

Although Temple's 40 years is overshadowed by the longevity of the Walnut and Merriam theaters, Temple's theater department was established before many of the city's prominent theaters. The Arden Theater, the Philadelphia Theater Company and the Wilma Theater all came after Temple. The school also established their theater department before the University of the Arts or the University of Pennsylvania.

Before 1967, Philadelphia was lacking in higher-level performing arts education programs. Since Temple's first graduating class, Philadelphia theaters have been flooded by Temple alum. There are Temple Theater graduates involved in most, if not all, of Philadelphia's theater productions at any given time. The Department of Theater at Temple University is a proud member of the Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance and the Theatre Alliance of Greater Philadelphia, as well as several national organizations, including the National Association of Schools of Theater.

In restaging "The Time of Your Life," Temple celebrates Mr. Saroyan, whose theatrical work emphasizes an appreciation for life. The characters in the play are common people who desire only simple, good-natured things, but are troubled by a troubled world - a world which is, in 1941, at war with itself. They find solace in a San Francisco dive bar, where friendship and community help them to overcome local injustice. The way that these characters cling to their neighborhood bar as an escape is comparable to the way people have always clung to theater and cinema in times of trouble. It is fitting to celebrate the anniversary of Temple Theater with a play that celebrates community and spirit.

Donna Snow, head of acting for the theater department, directs this rendition of "The Time of Your Life," which is presented by a diverse and qualified group of actors. Joe Guzmán does a fantastic job of presenting the main character, Joe. The character mostly sits at a table at the bar, and is drunk for the entirety of the show, but Mr. Guzmán delivers Joe's sentiments with sincerity and conviction. The rest of the cast works together to balance light-hearted entertainment with heart-breaking insight.

MFA students in the theatrical design programs contributed to the production by creating authentic costumes and stage setting, enhancing the tone of the play. The sparsely decorated bar reflects the simplicity of the characters' desires. The company made use of empty space on the stage, since there was none left in the audience. The show opened on Wednesday to a full house.

One of the wonderful things about timeless theater is the way it changes from performance to performance and city to city, reflecting local traditions as well as universal truths. In Philadelphia, the tradition is long and highly esteemed. Temple's theater department promises to carry on this tradition with energetic performances and fresh insights. If this season's schedule of performances is any indication of the program's future, then there are good things in store for Philadelphia indeed. In 40 years, Temple has surely succeeded in creating a theater program fully deserving of a place in Philadelphia's great dramatic tradition.

Temple's 2007-2008 season began with an acclaimed premier of "In Conflict" and continues with "The Darker Face of the Earth," "The Merchant of Venice" and "Five Women Wearing the Same Dress."

"The Time of Your Life" runs through Dec.1 at the Randall Theater. For tickets, please call 1-800-298-4200.

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