

Laughter on the 23rd Floor Review

By Nan Lincoln

The Bar Harbor Times Reporter

BLUE HILL (April 7): Those who have been unfortunate enough to have missed the first two New Surry Theatre productions at the Blue Hill Town Hall and the Grand Theater in Ellsworth, this third and final show of their winter performance season, "Laughter on the 23rd Floor," is the one to see.

Where "On Golden Pond" was poignant funny and "Lettice and Lovage" was smart funny, this show is just plain funny funny. I laughed so hard and so often at the opening show, last Friday night, I couldn't take notes. But I'll do my best here.

Written by Neil Simon, it is based on his experience as a young writer in the last year of the old Cid Ceasar TV variety show "Your Show of Shows." The play takes us way back stage to the writer's room where a motley crew of comic geniuses (which in real life included Carl Reiner, Imogene Coca, Mel Brooks, as well as Simon) who gather every day to share their comic ideas and their enormous insecurities and quirks.

There's head writer, Val, a Jewish Russian émigré played with a kind of morose charm by Ralph Chapman. I have to say here I've often written about how wonderful it has been to watch the young talents of MDI grow up on the high school stage. But it is equally wonderful to watch NST director Bill Raiten's acting pupils, many of whom, like Chapman, didn't start acting until middle age and beyond, evolve into serious, accomplished performers. Comedy is the hardest of all and Chapman is just terrific here with his slightly Yiddish, slightly Russian accent, mispronouncing obscenities to the merriment of his fellow writers.

There's wise-ass Milt, the gadfly of the group, played with wise-ass perfection by Tim Searchfield, always ready to burst any bubble of egotism that floats up, except of course the ones that he frequently flies.

Now comes Brian, the token gentile of the bunch – a handsome Irishman – handsomely played by Frank John, who is always on the brink of getting out and getting a job in Hollywood.

Kenny, the comic wonder kid all grown up, is somewhat underplayed by Charlie Marbach, but his deadpan delivery of Simon's lines does work and he looks perfect – like he just stepped out of a 1950's writers' room.

On the other end of the acting spectrum is Jim Fischer as the hypochondriachal Ira, who is always convinced he has developed some terrible fatal disease. One can't help picture Jack Lemmon in the role. Fischer has a tendency to overact and his whining about his aches and pains gets a bit sing-songy at times. Still, he is very funny and if he ramped it down a notch or two, letting Simon's lines do more of the work, he'd be funnier still.

Shari John as Carol, the only female member of the writing team, has found just the right balance for her role. She is quiet and wry, with a dead on ironic delivery (with just a hint of a midwestern accent, I think) until Ira makes her explode in a comic rage that is wonderful to behold.

Then there's Lucas, the new guy who must be Simon himself. Christopher Candage is totally believable as this clever young man who has found himself in

his dream job, only to watch it slowly being chipped away by corporate ignorance.

This rat pack of writers is led by the quirkiest and most insecure talent of the bunch, Max Prince – a big bear of a guy, brilliantly played by Michael Reichgott, whose insistence on putting on the funniest and smartest show on television during the McCarthy era – a time when smart and funny could be a dangerous combination – gets him in trouble with the network.

Reichgott is nothing short of a phenomenon. He blew into town a couple of years ago and happily found his way to the New Surry Theater. I first saw him in NST's "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum," where he was so brilliant that he tended to overshadow or overbalance the rest of the cast.

He is still incandescent – raging, weeping, storming, punching holes in walls – but this time the ensemble never wobbles as they revolve in orbit around this bombastic character.

In the only small role, Nina Poole as Helen, the secretary, is the perfect ingénue, with her angelic face and diffident delivery, clearly overawed by these funny men and women.

A large part of what makes all of this work so well is the look of the show. The set design and construction is spot on. And Elena Bourakovsy's costumes and make-up were so perfect, right down to the awful ties, fedoras and argyle socks that when I mentioned them to my 86-year-old mom, who was a young woman in

that era, she replied “what costumes?” She practically stood up and cheered when Max punched a hole in the wall in lieu of Joe MacArthy’s face. This was opening night and there were a few prop glitches (invisible money and a plate of seemingly invisible bagels and why no chair at one of the desks?) and the timing was just a hair off in some of the fast repartee. But this was the show’s first real audience and everyone was laughing so hard it’s no wonder it threw the actors off occasionally.

As I said, this is the one not to miss for anyone who could use a really good laugh right about now. And who couldn’t?

"Laughter on the 23rd Floor" continues at the Town Hall Theater in Blue Hill, April 10, 11, 17, and 18. The fun then moves to the Grand in Ellsworth, opening on April 24 and running April 25 and 26 and May 2 and 3. Tickets are \$15 and \$12 for seniors/students. All Friday and Saturday evening shows start at 7 p.m., Sunday matinees at 3 p.m. Tickets are available for Blue Hill shows at the Blue Hill Public Library or by calling 374-5556. Tickets for the Grand may be obtained by calling 667-9500 or online at www.grandonline.org.

Stimulus package from NST

In these hard financial times we are all going through, the New Surry Theatre is offering an economic stimulus package of its own for those theater lovers who are now financially challenged or recently laid off. There will be a limited number of complimentary tickets set aside for them on the nights of Friday, April 10 and Saturday, April 11 at the Blue Hill Town Hall Theater at 7 p.m. Please call the NST at 374-5556 for your reservations.