

Marcovicci Makes Things Fine With 'Finian's Rainbow'

Theater review: Concert version of the Broadway musical stresses stellar songs over outdated plot.

By LAURIE WINER
TIMES THEATER CRITIC

I could listen to Andrea Marcovicci sing all night and want more. The cabaret chanteuse graces the stage at the Freud Playhouse as Sharon in "Finian's Rainbow," part of the Reprise! "get-em-up-quick-but-good" musical series.

Marcovicci does not possess traditional stage pipes, and her voice is not technically great. She has a *quality*. To each song, she brings a saloon intimacy, along with a mature sadness, a unique sensitivity to lyrics and a keen intelligence. Within seconds of walking onstage she sings a rare and beautiful "How Are Things in Glocca Morra?" and William Biff Maguire, the actor who plays her father, breaks down and cries. "It's that cheap Irish music," he explains, weeping into his hands. That, and the fact that Marcovicci turns a song of homesickness into a deep and gentle eulogy to psychic displacement.

"Finian's Rainbow"—a great score by Burton Lane and E.Y. Harburg wrapped in a mediocre show—is a perfect vehicle for the Reprise! series, which throws together a concert version of a Broadway musical in about the time it took God to make the Earth. The breezy quality of the production allows no time to linger on a book (pared down here) that would not withstand careful scrutiny. But we get to hear the context for wonderful songs, like "Look to the Rainbow," "Old Devil Moon" and "When I'm Not Near the Girl I Love," the latter sung delightfully by Malcolm Gets, who plays Og, a tall leprechaun whose spirit is every bit as startling as his Kelly-green suit.

Gets is another reason to be grateful for the Reprise! series. He

is a gifted musical actor, and when he joined the sitcom "Caroline in the City," TV's gain was the theater's loss. And the loss was greater than the gain, artistically speaking. Reprise's eight-day rehearsal policy is a practical way to lure actors of such quality back to the stage. One might like to disapprove of hastily put-together shows, but at this caliber, who cares if the actors are holding scripts?

Like New York's Encore! series, upon which this is based, Reprise! injects some kind of magical energy into these projects; call it the sheer love of musical comedy. Director Will Mackenzie has done an extraordinary job, considering the time he was given, as did Stuart Ross with Reprise's debut production, "Promises, Promises." Janet Watson's choreography tries too hard to suggest a fully staged show—which translates into some forced-happy, high-corn choreography, with dancers performing cartwheels off other dancers' backs. But Watson does fresh, sexy work on the smaller numbers, most notably "Necessity," sung by the terrific Cleo King, and "The Begat," sung and danced in white tails by Jeff Coopwood, Marvin Thornton, Robert Barry Fleming and Elex Lee Vann.

As for "That Old Devil Moon," Rex Smith, as Woody, swings it nicely, to Peter Matz's swanky, jazzy arrangement. But when he isn't singing, Smith throws off the too-intense vibes of a stalker. As the deaf-mute Susan, Dana Stackpole (the young dancer from "Carousel") dances so joyfully here one can almost forget that her acting range is nil. Kevin Cooney is

a funny, cartoon villain. The plot of "Finian's Rainbow" is hokey, despite its good intentions in paving the way to better racial understanding. When a racist senator (Robert Mandan) threatens the good black people of Rainbow Valley, Sharon gets so angry that she wishes he could be black too. Since she happens to be standing over a buried magic pot of gold, he becomes black. And then he learns a thing or two about humanity. Politically outspoken in 1947, "Finian" has since tripped over an unexpected minefield. In one number, the townspeople get excited about the planting of a crop, which they dream will bring them all kinds of material goodies. Their harvest: tobacco.

But that's exactly why "Finian" is so right for this package. You don't want to labor over every plot point: Scan the show to relish its charms. While it may have been conceived for pure economy and convenience, Reprise! again serves up a winning formula: love, energy, and a wonderful/terrible musical from the Broadway candy dish.

■ "Finian's Rainbow," UCLA's Freud Playhouse, Westwood, Wed.-Sat., 8 p.m., Sat.-Sun. 2 p.m., Sun., 7 p.m. Ends Sunday. \$40-\$45. (310) 825-2101, (213) 480-3232. Running time: 2 hours, 20 minutes.

Dana Stackpole..... Susan Mahoney
Kevin Cooney..... Buzz Collins
William Biff Maguire..... Finian McLoneran
Andrea Marcovicci..... Sharon McLoneran
Rex Smith..... Woody Mahoney
Cleo King..... Necessity Lady
Malcolm Gets..... Og
Robert Mandan, Jeff Coopwood..... Sen. Billboard Rawkins
With: Wendee Breese, Iris Denmark, Melissa Fahn, Robert Barry Fleming, K.W. Miller, Carol Schuberg, Uelia Shearer, Timothy Smith, Melanie Taylor, Marvin Thornton, Elex Lee Vann.

A Reprise! production. Music Burton Lane. Book E.Y. Harburg and Fred Saily. Lyrics E.Y. Harburg. Reprise! concert version adapted by Jerome Kass and Will Mackenzie. Directed by Will Mackenzie. Choreography Janet Watson. Musical direction, new orchestrations Peter Matz. Dance music arrangements Trude Rittman. Vocal arrangements Lyn Murray. Sets David Sackeroff. Lights Tom Ruzika. Costumes Robert Blackman. Sound Jon Gottlieb & Philip G. Allen. Stage manager Larry Baker.

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