

Look to 'Finian's Rainbow' for grand time

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Well, it wasn't the cast that was originally announced. It wasn't even the second cast that was announced. But that didn't stop "Finian's Rainbow," the Reprise! musical theater series' second presentation at the Freud Playhouse at UCLA, from being an immensely entertaining experience.

Besides, when was the last time anyone has had a chance to see this wonderfully tuneful, romantically pixilated, socially conscious musical on stage? For many of us who grew up listening to the original cast recording with Ella Logan, it was a first.

One can certainly wonder what the performance would have been like if Joel Grey, Keith Carradine and Ned Beatty hadn't dropped out of the cast. But that's show biz.

What's important is that the show did go on starring a charming Andrea Marcovicci as Sharon McLonergan, the girl from Glocca Morra; last-minute replacement William Biff McGuire as her wanderlust-ridden father, Finian; Rex Smith as Woody, the handsome young farmer who falls for Sharon; and Malcom Gets as the transplanted leprechaun, Og, who finds himself slowly becoming mortal inch by inch.

Presented in a semi-staged manner, with the actors carrying scripts and little more than a gnarled old tree, a wishing well and some lighting effects to indicate time and place, the production still overflows with energy and spirit.

The music by Burton Lane and lyrics by E.Y. Harburg remain some of the best ever conceived for an American musical: a succession of memorable songs that include the melodious "How are Things in Glocca Morra" and "Look to the Rainbow," the jazzy "Old Devil Moon," the playful "When I'm Not Near the Girl I Love," the sarcastic "When the Idle Poor Become the Idle Rich" and the gospel-flavored "Necessity" and "That Great Come-and-Get-it Day."

Director Will Mackenzie has done his best to round off some of the show's more awkward 1949 edges while maintaining its pointed commentary on the need for racial equality. But when Robert Mandan, who plays the bigoted Southern senator, Billboard Rawkins, is magically transformed into a black man, Mandan is replaced by Jeff Coopwood, rather than appearing in black face as it was originally done. Also the fact that the sharecroppers of Rainbow Valley, Missitucky, rely on growing tobacco for their salvation is somewhat played down.

Ultimately, it's the characters and the tunes that make this show a must-see for anyone who truly loves American musical theater.

Smith and Marcovicci are perfectly paired as the young lovers. He's robust and hunky. She's starry-eyed and spunky. And even though Marcovicci's voice sounded a wee bit thin on opening night, she still managed to infuse her songs with real allure. And her accent is so convincing -- she must be one of the Irish Marcoviccis.

For a man who had little time to assimilate into the production, McGuire does a superb job as Finian. He's endearing, devilish and Irish to the core. The role seems custom-made for him.

The man who comes close to stealing the show, however, is Gets, as the green-blooded leprechaun who is slowly becoming amorously human. His metamorphosis from impish spirit to dashing lover is a high point of the evening.

Gospel singer Elex Lee Van also makes the most of her moments, combining the brass of a big mama blues singer with an abundance of spiritual soul.

The small on-stage musical ensemble is directed by Peter Matz, and the choreography, led by Dana Stackpole, is designed by Janet Watson.

If you haven't seen "Finian's Rainbow" this is a grand opportunity. Who knows when it will come around again? REVIEW

"Finian's Rainbow" plays at 8 tonight, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturday, 2 and 7 p.m. Sunday at UCLA's Freud Playhouse, Macgowan Hall, Westwood campus. Tickets: \$40-\$45. For information: 825-2101.