

July 17, 2007

## "Carousel" dazzles

**NJ Youth Theatre wows audiences with yet another big number**

**BY PETER FILICHIA  
STAR-LEDGER STAFF**

The New Jersey Youth Theatre has done it again.

Last year, it gave the state the best musical production of 2006, thanks to its stirring "Ragtime."

Right now, it has the best musical production of 2007, with Rodgers and Hammerstein's "Carousel."

While "Ragtime" seemed an impossible task -- until the troupe's teens and college students just went out and did it -- "Carousel" would appear to be more daunting still.

After all, "Ragtime" has little dancing, while "Carousel" begins with the swirling (and beloved) "Carousel Waltz," performed by the entire company. Virtually everyone must then tackle two enormous production numbers and a hornpipe. Plenty would have to perform the demanding second-act ballet, too.

Finally, "Carousel" sports the most difficult material ever given to a male musical performer: the eight-minute "Soliloquy" in which Billy Bigelow muses about becoming a father. He must reach greater emotional heights as every minute passes -- and hit higher notes en route.

Audiences at the Victoria Theater in Newark this week and at the Algonquin Arts Center in Manasquan next week will relax a bit after they see choreographer Sherry Alban's dazzling "Carousel Waltz." Then, as soon as Alexander Diaz opens his mouth to sing "If I Loved You," they'll be convinced this Billy will be able to handle the "Soliloquy."

He's equally matched by Lauren Palmeri as Julie Jordan, whom he meets at the carousel, to the consternation of his jealous boss, Mrs. Mullin. Palmeri does full justice to "If I Loved You" and brings great poignancy to "What's the Use of Wond'rin'?"

Both act superbly as well. Billy and Julie soon find that losing their jobs because of their love for each other causes an unresolvable problem -- especially for him, for he truly relishes his work. These characters are in serious trouble, and Diaz and Palmeri makes the audience ache for them.

Next to Billy, the toughest vocal role is Nettie, Julie's cousin. How magnificently Kelsey Thompson maneuvers "You'll Never Walk Alone," after she's had some fun with "June Is Bustin' Out All Over." Kevin Melendez shows a marvelous voice, too, as Enoch, the entrepreneur who marries Julie's best friend, Carrie. She's played with delightful insouciance by Jaclyn Ingoglia.

Mrs. Mullin isn't asked to sing, but Arielle Casner is extraordinary in the part. She shows she truly loves Billy. It's a small role, and it rarely makes an impression. Casner changes that with her fierce performance.

Though the entire company shows itself to be expert at dancing, Brianna Stimpson and Corey Mosello are standouts in the ballet. "Carousel" may be nearly three hours long, but director Cynthia Meryl -- who also helmed "Ragtime" -- keeps a firm grip on making it pass quickly.

Too quickly, in fact. When a theater does a lengthy show like this and makes it fly by, it isn't just doing something right. It's doing something spectacular.

July 27, 2007

## WELL WORTH A SPIN

By KARYN D. COLLINS  
Staff Writer

The voices — oh, the voices.

The young artists of the New Jersey Youth Theatre create musical theater magic in their production of Rodgers and Hammerstein's "**Carousel**." Fortunately for Jersey Shore theater fans, the production is coming to the **Algonquin Arts** Theatre in Manasquan for performances today through Aug. 5, following a brief run at Newark's New Jersey Performing **Arts** Center, a co-producer.

This is the type of production that makes you rethink any negative connotations associated with summer theater or youth productions in general. Thanks to director Cynthia Meryl, music director Ilene Greenbaum and choreographer Sherry Alban, the audience finds the highest levels of professionalism at every turn.

Close your eyes and it's hard to believe these performers are mostly high school and college-aged students. Even when you open your eyes, the performances for the most part ring true, making it easy to be swept away by this touching story about a ne'er-do-well carnival barker and the young innocent who loves him unconditionally.

The cast is led by a quartet of impressive performers — Lauren Palmeri, sweetly wholesome as the mill girl Julie Jordan; Alexander Diaz, whose carnival barker Billy Bigelow strikes the right tone of abusive bully and a man at war with himself; Jaclyn Ingoglia, cheeky and irrepressible as Julie's friend Carrie Pipperidge; and Kevin Melendez, comically proud as Carrie's intended, Enoch Snow.

In their hands, this "**Carousel**" has a sweet confidence and youthful energy, allowing you to just sit back and enjoy. Ensemble moments, particularly the rollicking Horn Pipe, are vibrantly done.

Yes, some of the faces look young, and some of the older, character parts, such as Nettie, Mrs. Mullins and the Starkeeper, seem a bit of a stretch in believability despite the yeoman efforts of the actors playing them.

It is worth noting, however, that one of the youngest looking actors — Diaz — does a superb job at making one forget his youthful appearance, navigating with extraordinary skill through the tricky range of emotions in Billy's famous "Soliloquy."

This is not a flawless production — if there is even such a thing. There are some aspects of staging, particularly entrances and exits along bridges and walkways, that sometimes seem odd. And the second-act **carousel** fantasy dance sequence staged by Alban and modeled after the original dances by Agnes de Mille were beyond the cast's capabilities for pointe work.

But on balance, these are small quibbles, certainly not enough to mar the beauty of this richly drawn production of "**Carousel**."

A production from the New Jersey Youth Theatre and the New Jersey Performing **Arts** Center Through Sunday and Aug. 1-5 — **Algonquin Arts** Theatre, 173 Main St., Manasquan — \$28; \$26 for seniors and students, \$14 for children — (732) 528-9211 or [www.algonquinarts.org](http://www.algonquinarts.org)