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Of Sorcery and Soul Mates

MEG's 'Bell, Book and Candle' charms October audiences

BY SELENA MILEWSKI OCTOBER 17, 2017 2:49 PM



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Milwaukee Entertainment Group's (MEG) production of *Bell, Book and Candle* is a well-chosen comedy for the Halloween season. The plot revolves around Gillian, a 1950s witch who casts a spell on an ordinary professional man, a publisher, to make him fall in love with her. By her side are an impish brother (also a warlock) with a penchant for upending her plans, an eccentric witch auntie and a writer determined to get to the bottom of witchcraft in the modern age. The real fly in Gil's ointment, though, is the fact that witches can't fall in love.

John Van Druten's script is a dazzlingly smart piece of mid-century comedy. Hold on tight for cute period words like "mingy" and an expansive quality of writing that makes you feel you're seeing an entire slice of the world instead of a single room populated by five characters. Likewise, as all good comedies should, *Bell* raises some serious questions, namely, what role can, or should, entrapment play in romantic love?

Under Amanda J. Hull and Tom Marks' direction, all performers—including, hold the "awws," a real live cat—were in fine form for their preview performance. Michael Keiley shines as the drunken, wild-eyed author, Sidney, and puts the audience in stitches with slapstick. As Aunt Queenie, Beth Perry is sagely off-kilter and possessed of the sort of comic timing found in Golden Age film. Jason Nykiel lights up the role of Nicky, Gil's brother, with a devilish charm and flashing smile that border appropriately on the disconcerting. Although stage chemistry didn't always ring true between them, the leads Randall Anderson (as Shep, the publisher) and Libby Amato (as Gil) were individually brilliant. Anderson compassionately brings to life a man flummoxed by an implausible fate and solidly fills the straight-man role the story needs. Amato's Gil is elegant, complex and highly dynamic; her character's transformation is compelling and even heartrending.

Production values are also strong. Hull handled set, props and costumes, and all are superb in the intimate basement theater (a former speakeasy) of the Brumder Mansion. From tasteful period furnishings and piano to a bejeweled Grimoire and exquisite black Christmas gowns for the ladies, *Bell* is a treat for the eyes. Marks' lighting, special effects and sound design are also on point. Look for tastefully understated stage magic and listen for narratively appropriate '50s favorites such as "I Put a Spell on You" and "Lonely Street."

Through Oct. 31 at the Brumder Mansion, 3046 W. Wisconsin Ave. For tickets, call 414-388-9104 or visit milwaukeeentertainmentgroup.com.

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