

'Heart' Triumphs Over Baseball In Monomoy's 'Damn Yankees'

by Joan Tacke Aucoin

Bet more than a few Red Sox fans would sell their souls to the devil just to have a championship season, let alone beating the New York Yankees. Dream on Red Sox Nation! Better yet, go to the Monomoy Theatre for their winning opening summer season production of "Damn Yankees" to see how Joe Boyd negotiated his deal with the spirit of evil to secure a championship pennant for his beloved Washington Senators, circa 1950. Some men would even risk hell for a dream.

Based on his novel "The Year the Yankees Lost the Pennant," Douglass Wallop collaborated with director George Abbott on the book. The 1955 Tony Award-winning musical (choreographed by Bob Fosse and introducing Gwen Verdon) blends a specter from the Bambino's curse, a sentimental husband-wife love story, the case for winning against all odds, capped with a capitol "B" for baseball. All the action literally takes place a short distance from a third base foul ball hit off the Chatham Anglers Cape League home field. Summer entertainment doesn't get any better than this!

Monomoy Theater is celebrating its 80th summer season, and first with new primary sponsor the University of Hartford. The transition from long-time sponsor Ohio University is seamless.

Director-choreographer Kyle Brand moves the sportive tale and Monomoy Theatre ensemble in and out of the Washington baseball field, locker room, dugout, manager's office, night club, and a mysterious Mr. Applegate's place with the graceful fluidity marking gifted professional athletes and dancers. Add Richard Adler and Jerry Ross' memorable music and lyrics to the star power of a baseball team and their loyal fans, an average married middle-aged couple, Beelzebub himself, a sultry femme fatale and it's time to "play ball!"

Monomoy favorites Sarah Killough (Lola), Juwan A. Crawley (Mr. Applegate), Colleen Welsh (Meg Boyd) return to join Artistic Director Alan Rust (Coach VanBuren), local favorites Scott Hamilton (Joe Boyd), Lou Maloof (Commissioner), Caroline Hussey and Lir Wood (Chevy Chase Kids fan club) along with a roster of multi-talented University of Hartford and University of Connecticut collegiate theater students to form their own championship team, hitting grand slam performances for all to enjoy. Darren Brown (UConn) stars in fine voice as young, strong Shoeless Joe Hardy from Hannibal, Mo., the long-ball hitter on a secret mission who clings to an escape clause on his contract for midnight Sept. 24. The story could not be complete without the presence of the media, relentlessly snooping for the scoop. Ella Mora is adorable and utterly obnoxious as news



Sarah Killough as Lola and Darren Brown as Joe in Monomoy Theatre's production of "Damn Yankees."
COURTESY PHOTO

hitter transform from pinch hitter to idol of the nation in just one month. Even the sniping reporter Gloria Thorpe dons pinstripes, leading the team in exuberant dance steps celebrating Shoeless Joe's arrival in "Shoeless Joe From Hannibal, Mo." Ella Mora's tiny footsteps confidently hint at victory.

Strange things happen in baseball. Sarah Killough deliciously delivers Lola's seduction of her new boy-toy at Mr. Applegate's demand. Lola's pretty good at making men forget their wives. She's been perfecting her craft for 172 years and still is in perfect form. Rest assured, Killough entices all the men in the audience with her beautiful long legs and sexy keenness. "Whatever Lola Wants" is relished with gusto. Sister (Justine Rosales) cheerfully accompanies the Senators fan club of precious kids (Caroline Hussey and Lir Wood) with ensemble members to a pep rally reprise of "Heart" as the scrim falls on a long but exciting first act.

Act two moves to a quicker, shorter pacing with Mr. Applegate stealing the show. Juwan A. Crawley,

reporter Gloria Thorpe.

Scott Hamilton and Colleen Welsh make no bones about it: Joe and Meg Boyd share their marital boredom "Six Months Out of Every Year" and loving bliss in tender-hearted unison. "A Man Doesn't Know." "Can't you understand how I feel, I was married at 20!" he says.

Joe meets a stranger who ignites fire from his fingertips and leaves his wife for baseball. Alan Rust's Coach VanBuren proves baseball is half skill and half harmonizing with "Heart." As the half dozen pinstriped young ball players learn their new hand signals, mope swings to hope in comical tobacco chomping scenes seeing the new long-ball

bold, brassy, and fabulously costumed in fiery red silk and black smoking jacket, fires up the theater with his dynamic vocalizations and unique song stylizing on "Those Were the Good Old Days." Crawley brings down the house with energy and song. I wished Applegate had more numbers in the show. How about a Crawley solo concert later in the season? You could listen to Crawley sing all night long.

"Two Lost Souls" on the highway to life then ignite in terrific choreography as Lola and Joe find themselves unearthed in a supernatural moment away for Washington baseball park. Killough and Brown make a magical moment for their characters' long anticipated embrace.

Glen Pep's artistic baseball field scrim and Lexi Macchiaroli's sounds of batter hits and fan stadium cheers add to an authentic baseball experience. Raven Ong and Amanda Cleveland-Davey have altered the original Washington Senator uniforms when Monomoy first produced "Damn Yankees" to mark the 100th anniversary of the Cape's Summer League some 30 years ago. Phil Rittner directs the musical score that is so pleasantly appealing you will find it almost impossible not to jump up on stage and partake in the show's "Heart" finale reprise. Another wish for the lyrics to be included in the program for a sing-along moment with the audience.

What's so damn funny about the Washington Senators winning the pennant? Monomoy's "Damn Yankees" triumphantly conquers hope, heart, marriage, and even the New York Yankees for the pure joy of entertaining you!

DETAILS:

"Damn Yankees"

At Monomoy Theatre

June 23-July 4, 8 p.m. (no show June 28); matinees

June 25, 27 and July 2 at 2 p.m.

Information and reservations: 508-945-1589,

www.monomoytheatre.org