

Written by Barbara Clark

Pl-a-a-a-y ball!

That's how the season kicks off at Monomoy Theatre, as a fresh cast of drama students from the University of Hartford's Hartt School hit a grand slam homer with their opening performance of the musical comedy "Damn Yankees," playing to an enthusiastic full house despite the numbingly hot temperature inside the theater throughout the performance. (One can only hope that situation will soon be corrected.)

"Damn Yankees," set in the 1950s when the Bronx Bombers' American League star was ascendant, zeroes in on sad, aging Washington Senators' fan Joe Boyd, who after watching the team lose to the Yankees again, cries out in desperation: "I'd sell my soul for one long ball!" and sets in motion a train of crazy circumstances, wherein he – almost – sells his soul to the wily Devil for the chance to hit that long ball himself and become a star slugger and local hero. Will he outwit the bad guy and win back his soul, not to mention his wife?

In their opening production, the theater ensemble has a winner on all fronts. Despite the show's age (the original Tony Award-winning Broadway production premiered in 1955), it remains a fresh, funny and innocent slice of Americana, retaining its cleverness and humor as well as such iconic toe-tapping numbers as "Heart," "Two Lost Souls" and "Whatever Lola Wants."

Colleen Welsh as Joe's long-suffering wife, Meg, has a strikingly lovely voice (we wanted more). Juwan A. Crawley, as the Devil (aka "Mr. Applegate"), has all the moves plus the voice plus the stage presence, bringing down the house with his dynamite Act II solo "Those Were the Good Old Days." (At one point, earlier on, he trips over something and complains, "Ouch – my hoof!")

As Lola, Sarah Killough takes over the stage, showing her star quality – she's seductive and hilarious at the same time and possesses a great theater voice. Plus she looks like she's having a lot of fun up there.

Darren Brown as the miraculous slugger Joe Hardy does the humble guy role with an appropriately down-home flavor, playing well off Lola's funny/sexy come-ons. Alan Rust is perfect as the team's gravelly, gruff coach. Justine Rosales is a hoot as Sister, who lets you know when she's around.

Thanks to Kyle Brand's creative choreography, the ensemble dance numbers are fun to watch, well-designed and full of energy. Every single cast member has a fine, clear singing voice and projects the innocence and fun-ness of the whole production. The baseball team's group numbers are especially cheerful, earning extra applause from the audience for their combination of tongue-in-cheek parody and thumbs-in-suspenders innocence. Not to mention these guys are also light on their feet.

Speaking of Kyle Brand, he also directed this fine production, which kept itself in motion, helping make lighter work of this musical's overlong script. The theatre orchestra makes you want to hear more of these tuneful, memorable numbers by composer/lyricists Richard Adler and Jerry Ross, whose work lit up the mid-1950s.

The sounds and scenes are clever and effectively produced. We know Joe's a hero, and somehow he'll beat the devil – we see a bunch of ballplayers standing still on stage, moving just heads and eyes in unison as we, too, watch – in our imaginations – that ball fly over the fence.