

Jersey's best teen performers strut their stuff in 'Kiss Me, Kate'

Published: Tuesday, July 19, 2011, 6:26 PM Updated: Wednesday, July 20, 2011, 11:55 AM



By [Peter Filichia/For The Star-Ledger](#)

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In foreground, Elyse Langley of Clarksboro and Stephen Mir of Bloomfield in the New Jersey Youth Theatre's "Kiss Me, Kate." Looking on are James Smith of Pompton Plains and Charles Centinaro of Fanwood.

Thousands go to see high school and college sporting events — but they don't pay nearly as much attention to high schoolers and undergrads who perform in musicals.

Well, they certainly should.

Especially when Cynthia Meryl brings her extraordinary New Jersey Youth Theatre to NJPAC in Newark. Each summer, Meryl puts on a show and demonstrates just how much kids can accomplish when a talented and discerning eye guides them.

This year's astonishment is "Kiss Me, Kate," the musical that Sam and Bella Spewack freely adapted from Shakespeare's "The Taming of the Shrew."

Their oh-so-clever idea was that Fred Graham and Lilli Vanessi, two Broadway stars who had been married but later divorced, are now rejoined professionally to put on a musical version of the Bard's comedy. That makes them just right for Shakespeare's warring Petruchio and Katharine.

Fred and Lilli still love each other, but each is too headstrong to show it. Besides, Fred now has his eye on cast member Lois, who has a thing going with another cast member, Bill.

Cole Porter wrote his greatest-ever score, but his most demanding one, too, for this show. Sopranos playing Lilli find their voices taxed by astronomically high notes. Baritones chosen to portray Fred must sing quick-patter comedy songs in addition to soaring ballads.

Leave it to Meryl to find kids who can do all that to perfection.

The statuesque Elyse Langley conveys the aura of an experienced leading lady. She has a glint in her eye that even those in the balcony will catch. Best of all, Langley isn't content to merely sing beautifully in "So in Love," the show's enduring hit — she fully expresses the pain of a woman remembering her marital failure. By the time she gets to "I Hate Men," women in the audience will cheer — and not merely because of the song's message. Langley's comic timing puts it over superbly.

Stephen Mir may seem young to play an established Broadway star, but his commanding performance suggests that he's a future Broadway star. In addition to a strong and secure voice, Mir has the right bravado for the role. And yet, when Fred truly believes that he's lost Lilli forever, Mir shows how genuinely wounded the man is. What's impressive about both performers is how they actually seem as if they've had a marriage's worth of history between them.

As Bill, Adam Biner is a magnificent dancer. The only giveaway that he's a kid is the way that he often slams his knees onto the stage without even wincing slightly. Only a youngster could do that.

Erica Morreale saucily plays Lois. What dynamism she shows in her show-stopper in which she tells Bill that she's "always true to you" — albeit "in her fashion."

Ashley Retamar gets the show off to a great start by brassily singing "Another Op'nin', Another Show."

Of course, it's much more than just another show when Meryl does it.

Another adult deserves commendation. Sherry Alban has provided sensational dances, including some terrific tarantellas, for the show. She even finds the right way to stage "Too Darn Hot." If the heat is so oppressive, why would anyone feel like dancing? Alban answers that by having one man (Alex Thompson) dance so well that the others just can't help themselves and must join him.

So this week — when neither high school nor college sporting events are available — see what some other young champions are achieving.

Kiss Me, Kate

Where: New Jersey Youth Theatre, Victoria Theatre, New Jersey Performing Arts Centre, 1 Center St., Newark

When: Through Sunday. Tonight through Friday at 7:30 p.m., Saturday at 1 and 8 p.m. and Sunday at 2 p.m.

How much: \$20 to \$30. Call (888) GO-NJPAC (466-5722) or visit njpac.org.