

Theatre Three closes its 37th season with *Sweet Charity*

By Lisa Napell Dicksteen

A book by Neil Simon, based on a movie by Federico Fellini. Music by Cy Coleman. Lyrics by Dorothy Fields, and original choreography by Bob Fosse – who could ask for anything more? For those who could, there's the wonderful tale of Charity Hope Valentine, the quintessential dance-hall hostess with a heart of gold.

When *Sweet Charity* opened on Broadway for the first time in 1966, Fosse and his wife, Gwen Verdon, who played Charity, ushered in what would become known as “the Fosse era” with its mime-like splayed hands, staccato movements, hunched shoulders, turned in feet, and sexually suggestive thrusting hips, forever altering the way audiences everywhere thought about dance in musicals. While the show was nominated for a dozen Tony Awards, it won only one, for Fosse's choreography. Having promised his house choreographer, Jean Sorbera, that they'd hire “only bona fide dancers” for this show, artistic director Jeffrey Sanzel worked with Sorbera music director Ellen Michelmore to integrate her brilliant interpretation of Fosse's classic and Michelmore's fabulous musical efforts into a seamless whole with the show's occasional non-singing, non-dancing moments.

Personally, I adore performances with live musicians. There's something thrilling about listening to them warm up while the audience settles into their seats, and there's something magical about live music accompanying the live singers and dancers on the stage that cannot be captured with even the most elaborate recorded music system. As usual, Michelmore has assembled a stellar pit crew: Murray Houllif on drums and percussion; Jeff Lange on piccolo, flute, alto flute, clarinet, an alto saxophone; Steve Costenbader on clarinet, bass clarinet, and baritone saxophone; Dan Yeager and Mike Chiusano on trumpets; Rex Enderlin on trombone; Brian Chabza on guitar and violin; and Mark Verdino and Mike Rubenstein on bass.

There are songs in this show that you are likely to know, or at least have heard, whether you know anything about the show or not; “Hey! Big Spender,” “If My Friends Could See Me Now,” “I'm a Brass Band,” and “I Love to Cry at Weddings.” And there are wonderful other numbers, “Sweet Charity,” “You Should See Yourself,” “There's Gotta Be Something Better than This,” “Bravest Individual,” “Baby Dream Your Dream,” and more. Yet, once the overture is over, even the best musicians take second place to the actors on the stage, supporting and assisting them, without ever overpowering or overwhelming.

As usual, Sanzel has brought together a vibrant ensemble cast in which many supporting roles are played by the same actors, allowing the audience to see multiple aspects of their talent on the same night. Morgan Howell Rumble is the first person on the stage,

slouching into his role as Charlie, one of the many louses to whom Charity gives her heart before she meets the sweet, neurotic Oscar Lindquist (Stan Kubica). Rumble's Charley is the epitome of the bad boyfriend, ignoring Charity's affections and dumping her, literally, without ever saying a word. We also see Rumble used to great effect as the doorman at the fancy Pompeii club where Charity meets the famous movie star Vittorio Vidal (Jon Rivera), Vidal's manservant, the man at the information desk at the 92nd Street Y, the balloon seller in the park, and the sloppy drunk at Charity's going away party.

Frank Russo shows off his wonderful voice as Big Daddy Bruebeck, leader of the Rhythm of Life Church. He also inhabits the part of the owner of the Fan-Dango Ballroom where Charity and her friends work with just the right amount of surface gruffness and under-cover softness. Matteo Paduano is another Theatre Three regular with a wonderfully split personality in this show. He plays the cop who unsympathetically greets Charity after she climbs out of the lake in Central Park, and has several incarnations as a waiter.

Rivera's Vidal is self involved, in love with another woman, and the first man to see Charity for what she is, innocence and goodness dressed as a cheap floozy. He is kind to her, not taking advantage of her despite her broader than broad hints that it would be fine with her. In turn, she helps him to get back together with the woman he loves, the mercurial Ursula March (Sophie Vanier). Vanier gives Ursula a passionate temper and the type of jealousy born of knowing your suspicions are often well founded. Vanier also takes a great turn as one of the dance hall girls. Elizabeth Trupia also begins wonderfully as one of the dance hall girls; making her second appearance more squarely in the spotlight as the new girl who seems rather innocent, until the vying for customers begins and she shows she knows how to "merchandise" as well as an old hand.

Rebecca Miller is Helene, one of the trio of dancers we see most often. She's more cynical and hardened than Charity will ever be, and does her best to keep Charity from floating away on her impossible dreams. Charity's other friend, Nickie, is brought to life so vividly by Sari Feldman that you can almost hear her gum cracking when she talks. Feldman, who serves as dance captain for the shows' wonderful team of dancers, is also the main attraction during the "Rich Man's Frug," a frothy dance-only confection that must have been the inspiration for the party scenes on *Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In* many years later.

And the guy who's going to take Charity away from all of this? Good old dependable Oscar the accountant is portrayed wonderfully by Kubica. He brings together just the right balance of neurotic shyness, old-fashioned goodness, inexperience, and provincialism to make us believe he really could fall in love with Charity. His fall from grace is as painful for him and Charity as it is to the audience hanging on every word.

Speaking of Charity, Laura Bell invests this potentially stock character with the life Fellini, Simon, and generations of directors, actors, and audiences intended. She is perfectly cast; a solid actor, a lovely singer, and a wonderful dancer. As a woman who is

more than her job, yet is utterly defined by her job (as epitomized by the little red dress she wears) in the world, Charity flits from disaster to disaster, always hopeful for tomorrow. And Bell allows us to see the underlying faith in the goodness of the world that sustains her, and us, as the world goes on being its usual uncharitable self all around her.

This is a wonderful production of a delightful show. Give yourself a treat, get your tickets now. Sweet Charity will be at Theatre Three through June 23. Tickets are \$28 for Saturday evenings, \$23 for Friday evenings, and \$21 for all other performances. Children are always \$12. For reservations, group discounts, and more information, call the box office (928-9100) or go to www.theatrethree.com.