

A down-home good time

'Music Man' an apt choice to close Nevada Conservatory Theatre's season

By **JOE BROWN**
Las Vegas Sun

Maybe Nevada Conservatory Theatre chose "The Music Man" to close its successful season with an eye to its submerged sociopolitical comment — after all, it's about a fast-talking fear-monger and flim-flam man who conjures a scare to create a need for his product.

Or maybe it picked the 1958 Broadway classic because it recently marked its 50th anniversary. (In 1962 it became a movie musical starring Robert Preston, Shirley Jones and a freckled tyke named Ron Howard — "Ronny" back then — in a memorable role.)

But more than likely the theater group decided to revive "The Music Man" just because it's a sweet-hearted show, overstuffed with memorable songs, a guaranteed good time.

At UNLV's Judy Bayley Theatre tonight through Sunday, this affectionate slice of small-town Americana gets a big city staging. This good-looking production is an ambitious undertaking — not counting the orchestra, there are more than 40 people on the small stage at times, and at least as many behind the scenes — and Nevada Conservatory Theatre brought in some city slickers, including a well-known New York director, Michael Barakiva, who deserves some kind of award for just keeping the onstage traffic moving and the story line clear. They also imported a pair of Broadway actors for the lead roles.

Notorious among his peers, traveling salesman "Professor" Harold Hill arrives by train on the Fourth of July, and begins taking the town — River City, Iowa, circa 1912, population 2,212 — by storm, wooing its citizens one by one, from schoolkids to the mayor to the spinster librarian.

The solid, dour citizens of River City pride themselves on the skeptical chip on their collective shoulder — they're "Iowa Stubborn," as the song sung by the entire town puts it. But Hill is a con man par excellence, and takes an overheard conversation about a pool table, tosses in a dash of patriotism and piety, and turns it into a head-snapping, tongue-tangling rabble-rouser called "Ya Got Trouble," whipping the townspeople into a froth — a singing, dancing, clapping froth — about Heartland Youth in Moral Peril.

Hill's specialty scam is that he's a bandleader — never mind that he "can't tell a bass drum from a pipe organ." Before skipping town, he proposes to form a band, selling musical instruments, sheet music and — this seals the deal for the kids — uniforms.

Soon the Iowans are fantasizing about the glory that will be their band, newly awakened to civic pride and aesthetic impulses. The townspeople were an easy sell; Hill's toughest challenge is winning the trust, and eventually the heart, of the skeptical librarian, Marian.

"The Music Man" has an almost unfair number of gosh-darn swell songs: "Good Night My Someone,"



PHOTOS BY LEILA NAVIDI / LAS VEGAS SUN

Patrick Ryan Sullivan as "Professor" Harold Hill, left, and Val Kolar as Constable Locke perform in a dress rehearsal of "The Music Man," the 1958 classic being staged beginning tonight by Nevada Conservatory Theatre at UNLV.

IF YOU GO

What: "The Music Man"
When: 8 tonight through Saturday, 2 p.m. Sunday
Where: Judy Bayley Theatre, UNLV campus
Admission: \$20-\$30, \$17-\$25 for seniors, students and military; 895-2787, unlvtickets.com
Running time: About 2 hours, 45 minutes, with one intermission

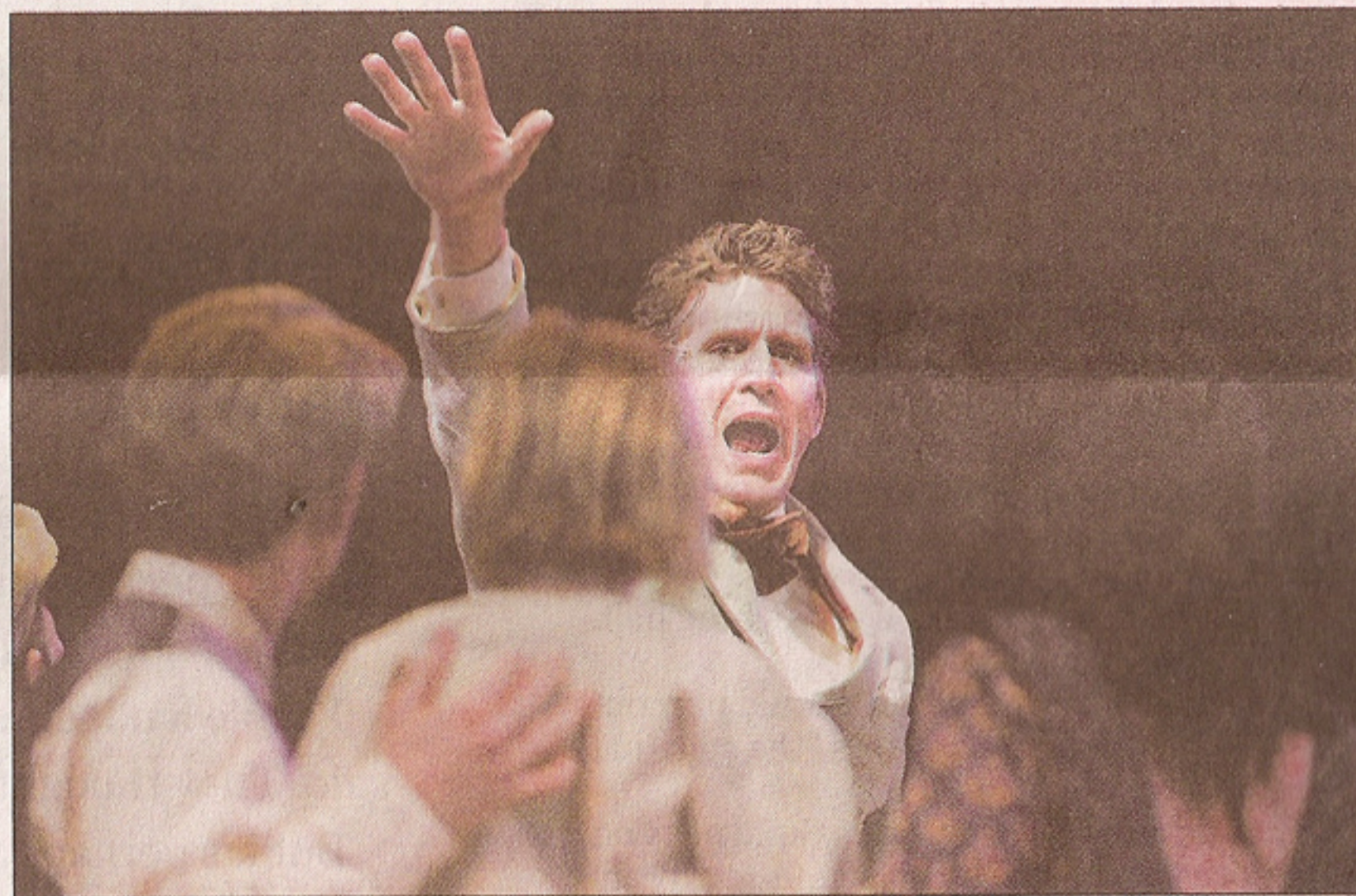
"My White Knight" and "Till There Was You" (incidentally, the only Broadway song the Beatles ever recorded).

Oh, and a little number called "Seventy-Six Trombones."

Songs are sung from front porches and screen doors, in town squares and school gyms. Meredith Willson wrote the book, lyrics and music, drawing from his Iowan boyhood, and he gets playful with the Midwestern vernacular and conversational colloquialisms, setting a soliloquy to a child's wobbly piano lesson, several others to a barbershop quartet, and one comical tune is set to the clucking clamor of a moving cloud of town gossips.

In director Barakiva's clever staging of the opening scene, 10 traveling salesmen on a train car banter and bicker about sales territory and the bad rep of Harold Hill. Willson's lyrics are kind of a proto-rap, passed back and forth among the men and set to the rhythmic chugging of the train, the bounce and sway of the rails.

Patrick Ryan Sullivan makes a robust and likable Harold Hill, and



Sullivan, one of two Broadway actors chosen for lead roles, plays a con man who convinces the people of a small Iowa town they will find glory by forming a band. A tougher sell, however, is skeptical librarian "Marian," played by Teri Bibb.

he expertly shoots the tricky rapids of the huckster's tongue-twisting lyrics. Teri Bibb gives Marian the librarian a lovely bell-clear soprano, though her character remains a bit chilly.

Most of the other performers are your classmates, friends and neighbors, and they really pop in the energetic crowd scenes, creating endearing side characters. Taylor Hanes, for instance, wins laughs by channeling comic actor Will Ferrell as the oafish Mayor Shinn. The youngest actors are impressive, particularly Benjamin Blomquist, who cheerily lisps his way through his big number, "Gary, Indiana." (Chase Daniels doubles in the role.)

John Slocum, Edward Cotton,

Dale Roberson and Stuart Smith make up the extraordinary strolling barbershop quartet, which is hilariously and instantaneously convened from the greybeards of the school board as yet another ingenious dodge by Hill. One of the show's most memorable moments comes when they softly croon "Lida Rose," while maid Marian trills "Sweet and Low" as a descant.

"The Music Man" is one of those don't-make-'em-like-that-anymore musicals that send you out the door humming. And grinning. And maybe even marching, too.

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