

# The Malibu Times

MALIBU NOW

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## 'Glorious!' play lives up to its title



"Glorious!," directed by Dianne Carroll, is now playing at the Malibu Stage Company.

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The Malibu Stage Company comedy commands a full house and a standing ovation on its opening night.

By Michael Aushenker /Special to The Malibu Times

Last year, serious themes gripped Malibu Stage Company within a powerful production of "A Soldier's Play," and even the comedy "The Wild Party," which also commented on strained race relations and other heavy matters. "Glorious!," playing at the Malibu Stage Company through July 24, rivals the high caliber of the previous productions, albeit wrapped in the form of a light, sweet, boardwalk confection.

Rounding out the company's 2010-11 season, "Glorious!" provides an unfettered good time with the

singular intention of entertaining, just in time for the care-free days of summer.

Three years after she directed this Peter Quilter comedy (with almost the exact same cast) at MSC, Diane Carroll returns with a new and improved "Glorious!" as several opening-night accounts claimed that this revival is even stronger than the original version. The reception it received on opening night last Friday supported such assertions, as "Glorious!" packed the house with a sold-out crowd and closed quite triumphantly to a standing ovation.

Rich with zingers and braced by a straight-forward story not burdened by the contrived, twisting machinations of many a farce, "Glorious!" set in Manhattan circa 1944, tells the "true story" of Florence Foster Jenkins (Nathalie Blossom), perhaps the opera world's worst singer. The independently wealthy Jenkins operates within a delusional bubble where her boyfriend St. Clair (Peter Elbling) and best friend Dorothy (Nancy Little) all feed into Florence's unfounded notions of grandeur, despite the fact that she couldn't carry a note if it were glued to the bottom of her handbag. Outside of her small choir of friends who have convinced themselves that this singer is a dynamo, Florence is so thin-skinned and allergic to criticism and hecklers, she literally interviews the attendees of her recitals before allowing them to hear her sing ("It's the only way to root out the enemy," Florence says).

The play's narrative begins as Florence hires a pianist, the mild-mannered, dinner club-destined Cosme McMoon (Beverly Craviero), to replace the many ivory-tickers who have abandoned her due to Florence's flagrant lack of talent. Cosme is the only one in the room not drinking the Kool-Aid, and he intends to bolt from Florence's fold until she makes him an offer he can't refuse and triples the pay of his current employer. Reluctantly, Cosme joins the Jenkins Admiration Club, even though it's killing him on the inside.

The play's turning point comes after Florence survives a car crash and is comically confronted by a representative of the Music Lovers of America, an organization that intends to put a halt to Florence's horrific public performances. Yet against all odds, Florence manages to climb to greater professional heights, as her unlikely upward momentum propels her toward a career-making performance at Carnegie Hall.

Produced by Richard Johnson and Wendy Carroll, this staging of Quilter's 2005 stage comedy offers a solid cast from top to bottom. Blossom as Florence Foster Jenkins delivers a terrifically out-sized performance with a physicality that harkens back to the way Carol Burnett used to inhabit a character on her variety show, as Blossom milks Florence's myopic worldview and miserable vocals for every last drop. Little brings much spring and flakiness to her part as Florence's flighty friend, and while the casting of Craviero, a woman, as the male Cosme is initially confusing, once the character is established, the choice quickly makes sense. Craviero does a good job delivering some sarcastic asides.

Cosme McMoon aside, the other unhappy captive of Florence's immediate circle is Maria the maid, played with relish by Colombian-born actress Sandra Medina, who curses in her native tongue as she huffs around miserably in the service of her condescending company of Spanish language-manglers.

"I'm sure what she says is colorful," Florence muses after one of Maria's Spanish tirades. "We hope to replace her soon."

In Medina's hands, the hot-blooded Maria is something of a Latina twist on the put upon butler Lurch from "The Addams Family," only cuter and with much more energy.

"Is she plucking a chicken for dinner?" Cosme asks as Maria, brow permanently furrowed, methodically rips the feathers off of a poor dead bird. "Oh, no, that's just her way of relaxing," Florence replies, smiling.

Among the supporting cast, Elbling (who is not one of the original 2008 players) knocks it out of the ballpark as St. Clair, the innocuously lascivious, show-stealing Englishman who delivers many of the play's best quips. Elbling perfectly projects the preposterous St. Clair's mix of high buffoonery and dry wit.

During the Music Lovers clash with Florence, St. Clair's quicksilver tongue gets the upper hand after they try to pull away the pompous leader of the group that intends to pop Florence's balloon.

"I've never been manhandled like that!" exclaims the haughty Miss Verinder Gedge (Carolyn Hunter, doing her best Margaret Dumont).

"That I believe!" St. Clair fires back.

Amid all the comedy, there is much singing, dancing and piano-playing here that should not be taken for granted. Despite the purposeful lack of musicality that such characters as Florence call for, the talented actors play piano adeptly and sing miserably admirably (as only a good singer slumming it can).

Ultimately, "Glorious!" delivers many punch lines, some surprises and even a touch of poignancy.

"The approval of the audience is always a battle..." St. Clair declares late in the play.

Judging by last Friday night's reception, Quilter and Carroll, with "Glorious!," have won the war.

*More information about the play and tickets can be obtained online at [www.malibustagecompany.org](http://www.malibustagecompany.org)*

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