

“Wonderettes” return to Springfield Players stage

By **BILL LOCKWOOD**
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SPRINGFIELD, Vt. — The Springfield Players are presenting a delightful production of Roger Bean’s nostalgic collection of popular ‘60s and ‘70s songs woven into the stories of a high school singing group “The Marvelous Wonderettes: Dream On” through this weekend at the Players Studio Theater in Springfield.

Two seasons ago the Players presented Bean’s original “The Marvelous Wonderettes.” Director Donald Gray as well as two cast members, Samantha Holmberg and Carole Clark, have returned to present this sequel to the original. The cast is completed by two more Wonderettes, Meredith Pelton and Robin Stoto. Together these four women work well as an ensemble and each create distinct characters as well.

Bean’s original Wonderettes production was set in 1958 around the group’s appearance at their high school graduation from, of all places, Springfield High School. The only thing that makes you realize that this is not our Springfield is that the school mascot is a “fighting chipmunk” not the Comos.



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The Wonderettes practice a dance step in the “Dream On” sequel. There are more performances on Nov. 2 and 3.

The first act of the “Dream On” sequel is set 10 years after the graduation when the Wonderettes re-unite to perform at the retirement party of their favorite teacher. In this act the group dresses in Simplicity Pattern dresses with matching headbands and white go go boots, and their stories are told around nostalgic ‘60s pop songs such as; “Downtown” (1964), “Build Me Up Buttercup” (1968), “More Today Than Yesterday” (1969), and a real favorite of mine, “When Will I Be Loved” (1960). Making

a good transition to the ‘70s, they then appear for the second act in sparklies and bell bottoms with the story set 10 years later at their class’s 20-year reunion. And as their lives progress the stories become perhaps a bit more serious. Here songs include; “I Can See Clearly Now” (1972), “Love Will Keep us Together” (1975), and “The Hustle” (1975).

The very loose plot is simply a vehicle for the songs, but it is effective in tying the life stories of the Wonderettes together. The songs fit really well into the stories the

individual characters tell of their changing lives. The singing and delivery of the songs by the cast with their harmonies and the arrangements gives the entire effect a pleasing sweet quality.

Mention must also be made of music director Parker Eastman and the five other musicians that form the pit orchestra, all hidden behind a curtain at the back of the stage. Eastman created his own arrangements of the songs, and he conducts as well as plays keyboard and various wind instruments. The accompaniment is

extremely versatile and never overpowers the singers or their songs that were the good product of vocal director Cindy Hughes. The simple choreography of Kay Burge kept the Wonderettes moving, but, like the accompaniment, did not overpower the songs.

Cleverly Gray has used a little audience participation to fill out the storytelling. The hapless homeroom teacher gets briefly pulled, harmlessly thank goodness, from the audience to grade a backlog of old papers as do a character’s “husband” and two “parents” who end up on stage in the middle of all four Wonderettes doing “The Hustle”. It would be unfair to single out any of the four Wonderettes as the star. They were all good in their roles, and in their singing in ensemble and each in turn as lead. Gray’s staging, that at this theater includes working around two roof support poles in the middle of the stage, was clever and imaginative as well. Quickly, one forgets those poles are even there.

The Springfield players are in the midst of a large and ambitious renovation project that will hopefully one day eliminate their on-stage poles.

They already have gotten some significant grants that helped upgrade their lighting and other tech equipment as well as getting a new piano. A new follow spot was used effectively for this show. This is the group’s 98th. season in town. At one time in their history they performed, coincidentally, on the stage at Springfield High School. They have been in their current space since 1981. The Springfield Players are certainly going strong.

Though never a big Broadway hit Bean’s original had a successful Off Broadway run after its debut at the Milwaukee Repertory Theater as well as a notable two-year run at the El Portal Theater in Los Angeles. Both the original and this spin off lend themselves well to community theater and small venues. And for those of a “certain age,” it’s a real nostalgia piece. As I heard one audience member say, “How can you not leave this show happy?”

The production will continue Friday and Saturday, Nov. 2 and 3 at 7:30 p.m. For information on this or their future plans it can be found at springfieldcommunityplayers.org.