

[The Star Online](#) > [eCentral](#) > Sound & Stage

Tuesday December 30, 2008

Souvenir offers side-splitting laughter

By AMY DE KANTER

If laughter is the best medicine, there's nothing healthier than Gardner & Wife's latest production, *Souvenir*.

It's been a very good year for Malaysian theatre audiences. I never thought I would see the day when we would be so spoiled for choice. A great deal of it is thanks to KLPac and the soon-to-be deeply missed Actor's Studio at Bangsar Shopping Centre, Kuala Lumpur.

From now until Jan 4, Gardner & Wife treat us to *Souvenir*, a splendid ending to the old year and beginning to the new. Much has been written about this comedy, with grand promises to audiences. Opening night showed that every promise has been fulfilled and surpassed.

Souvenir is the story of an unlikely pair. A young man, Cosme McMoon (played by Llew Marsh), comes to New York, full of dreams of achieving musical greatness. Like so many starry-eyed youths, he finds himself having to accept less-than-glamorous jobs to survive in the big city. His artistic integrity is tested to its limit when he meets Madame Florence Foster Jenkins who needs an accompanist for her upcoming public performance.

When Cosme first hears her sing, his fingers freeze on the piano as he stares at her in shock, bewilderment and horror. She is terrible. More than terrible, she is utterly tone deaf, which may explain why she has managed to convince herself that she possesses a rare talent.

It is only the need to pay rent, the assurance that it will be a performance for a private party and the hope that he can help her improve that finally, though reluctantly, he accepts the job.



Souvenir is the story of Cosme McMoon (Llew Marsh, left) and his employer, Madame Florence Foster Jenkins (Gabrielle Maes).

Although it is Cosme who is constantly on stage, sometimes narrating, sometimes interacting with his employer, it is Madame Foster, played to absolute perfection by Gabrielle Maes, who owns the

show.

From the moment she hurries on stage in ill-fitting clothes and a mess of silvery curls, we are transfixed. She is, Cosme says, “transparently sure of herself”, and it is her joy and innocence that make her dreadful singing not only tolerable but almost a pleasure to listen to.

She is a lovable Don Quixote, whose delusions are harmless and enthusiasm, touching. True talent is often tortured (Cosme is a case in point), but Madame Foster is nakedly delighted by her “gift” which she hilariously believes includes perfect pitch.

The audience grows to feel, as Cosme does, a protective affection for the enchanting woman, even as she brutally (but cheerily) murders some of the world’s best-loved classics.

We may laugh at her outrageousness (her “trick” to reaching the F above high C in Mozart’s *Queen of the Night* is one of the funniest things I’ve ever seen), but the laughter is warm, the kind usually inspired by precocious children, kittens or puppies.

Part of Madame Foster’s charm is that, believing so firmly in her own talent, she feels it is her duty to share it with everyone, to honour composers of beautiful pieces, in particular Mozart.

Like Cosme, the more we like Madame Foster, the more we worry that one day this delusion, the reason for her enduring optimism, will be shattered. She is proud that her performances provoke tears. But only Cosme sees that these are tears of laughter. He does his best to limit her audience size so that her friends will never be outnumbered by those who only see her as a phenomenal joke.

Even the clever and motivated Cosme cannot stop the Madame’s fame from spreading, or the requests coming in for more and more performances, culminating in every singer’s dream – the chance to sing at Carnegie Hall. Tickets sell out within hours and thousands of disappointed people have to be turned away.

Though seemingly uncomfortable on stage, Marsh is at his best when he is singing or providing accompaniment to his Madame. Maes is at her best every second of the play and it all culminates in the very last performance of the evening, which, once again provokes tears. This time unaccompanied by laughter.

It’s been a wonderful year for theatre goers and *Souvenir*, the finale, deserves a standing ovation. Don’t miss it.