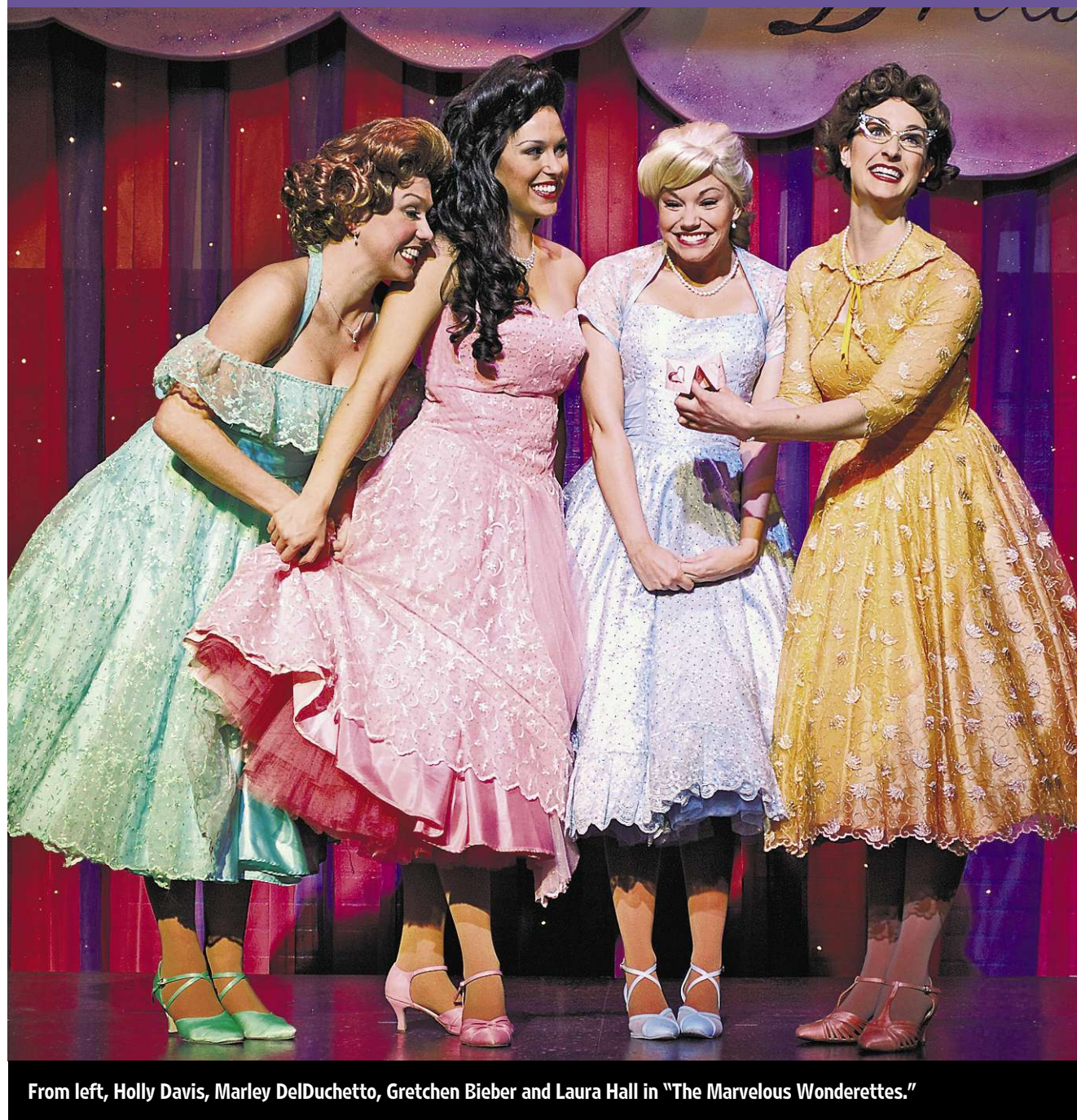


STAGE

THEATER, DANCE, COMEDY



From left, Holly Davis, Marley DelDuchetto, Gretchen Bieber and Laura Hall in "The Marvelous Wonderettes."

SIMPLY IRRESISTIBLE

Crowd-pleasing jukebox musical spins hits of the '50s, '60s

BY JOHN MONAGHAN
FREE PRESS SPECIAL WRITER

"The Marvelous Wonderettes" works because of an irresistibly simple premise. Four girls, all adorable, perform popular songs at their senior prom in 1958, then return after intermission to sing for their 10-year class reunion.

Of course, they're all stereotypes. Missy (Laura Hall) sports cat-eye specs and likes to sew. Suzy (Gretchen Bieber) is a platinum blond charmer, recently pinned, whose boyfriend runs the light board.

Smart, insecure Betty Jean (Holly Davis) fights for the spotlight with Cindy Lou (Marley DelDuchetto), the guy magnet who has kissed Betty Jean's boyfriend.

"Wonderettes" is a jukebox musical, which means that it uses popular hits of the '50s and '60s instead of original tunes to move its story along. Roger Bean launched the show in Milwaukee in 1999, but it didn't reach off-Broadway until almost a decade later. All of the actresses in the Detroit production have been imported from New York.

The show's premise works best in the first half as

specific boy problems are referenced through tunes like "Stupid Cupid" and "Lipstick on Your Collar" and Missy goes weak-kneed for a teacher in "Mr. Lee" and "Born Too Late." (Be prepared to see a male audience member seated near the front enlisted to climb onstage.)

Even if you aren't part of the roughly 70-year-old female demographic that "Wonderettes" is targeting (it was out in force at a preview performance Sunday), you'll enjoy the way the actresses make these songs their own. Intentionally clumsy during the opening "Mr. Sandman," the girls build confidence through the first act, alternating leads on pop standards like "Secret Love" and "Allegheny Moon."

'The Marvelous Wonderettes'

★★★

out of four stars
Wed.-Sun. through March 28
Gem Theatre
333 Madison, Detroit
313-963-9800
www.gemtheatre.com
\$28-\$42.50

In the second act, the script proves more forced. Songs dictate that Cindy Lou's new boyfriend be both the son of a preacher man and the leader of a motorcycle pack. The second-act numbers also present more of a challenge range-wise. The girls are in slightly over their heads when they tackle soul standards "Rescue Me" and "Respect." (For the record, Motown gets a single shout-out: Martha and the Vandellas' "Heat Wave" is part of the second-act opener.)

There are about 30 songs in the two-hour show, and the large number isn't surprising when you consider that most of the original recordings were less than 3 minutes each.

Michael Carnahan's set design perfectly replicates an old-fashioned high school gym. It's fun to note his attention to detail, including the blue-and-gold championship banners, white porcelain water fountains and the protective wire over the vintage clock and scoreboard. The costumes by Ellis Tillman are a teen dream of sparkling pastels in the first act. Bold miniskirts and Nancy Sinatra boots dominate in the second, which finds the girls looking as if they've just stepped out of a Virginia Slims ad.

Any stab at social relevance gets trumped by "American Bandstand"-like nostalgia. There's nary a mention of Vietnam, bra burning or the Summer of Love. Aside from three bouffant hairdos, two wedding rings and one pregnancy, the Wonderettes don't change much over 10 years, even if the world does.

But maybe asking for relevance is a bit much. "The Marvelous Wonderettes" is first and foremost a crowd-pleaser. Like the quartet itself, the show is perky, talented and a little ditzy. All in all, it's a perfect fit for the intimate Gem Theatre stage.

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