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# Music and marriage, mixed in 'They're Playing Our Song'

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From left are Michael Mahler, Dara Cameron, Doug Pawlik, Leah Morrow, Matthew Sherbach, Madeline Duffy-Feins, Sara Seigny, and Rodrigo Ignacio Cruz during a rehearsal for "They're Playing our Song" by the Fox Valley Repertory Theatre at Pheasant Run in St. Charles.

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By Jamie L. Greco

Fox Valley Repertory's "They're Playing Our Song" will open Saturday, Aug. 27, at Pheasant Run Theater in St. Charles.

It's perhaps one of the lesser-known works by playwright Neil Simon, whose blockbusters include "The Odd Couple," "Barefoot in the Park" and "Sweet Charity."

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The story is essentially, a two-person show about the real-life romance of 1970s hit makers, lyricist Carole Bayer Sager and composer Marvin Hamlisch. A Greek chorus of six sings the couple's thoughts.

In a bit of typecasting, married couple Dara Cameron and Michael Mahler will be playing Bayer Sager and Hamlisch, neither of whom are concerned over the abundant face time they will be experiencing until the play closes in October.

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What: The Fox Valley Repertory's production of "They're Playing Our Song"

When: The show will open Saturday, Aug. 27 and continue through Sunday, Oct. 9. Show times are 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays; 2 p.m. Sundays; Thursday performances are 8 p.m. today (Aug. 25), and 2 p.m. Sept. 1 and 15 and Oct. 6.

Where: Pheasant Run, 4051 E. Main St., St Charles

Tickets: \$29 on Thursdays and Fridays and \$39 on Saturdays and Sundays; dinner show packages from \$49; group rates and overnight packages available

Details: For tickets, call (630) 584-6342 or visit 222.ticketmaster.com. For show information, see foxvalleyrep.org

When asked about the pluses of working together, both Cameron and Mahler, who have been married for two years, mentioned the convenience of being "car pool buddies."

However, the biggest payoff has been the ease of transitioning their relationship into that of characters, Vernon and Sonia, which has been a blessing, not only for the couple, but also for Director Jonathan Berry.

"It's hard to invent chemistry," Berry explained. "And it's been a pleasure to watch them work together and bring their history to the stage. They've been able to bring their own relationship into the work which makes it bigger and stronger and it's been a real pleasure, that aspect."

"We've been doing pretty well so far," said Mahler. "I think going into this we knew it was going to be pretty wonderful or awful. So far, it's been great. We've been able to lean on each other."

"It's nice to have time together at work because that doesn't happen to us very often," Cameron said. "It's nice to have your own personal cheerleader, especially if it was a particularly frustrating rehearsal. He was there and he can say what I need to hear sometimes."

As far as correlation between the real-life spouses and the fictional couple, both agree that there is more similarity

between Mahler and the Hamlisch character than with their female counterparts.

"She's kind of a free spirit, very eccentric in a lot of ways," said Cameron said of her character. "It's been fun because I don't get to do that very often."

"Michael's playing a character that he is a lot more like perhaps, then I am. He's playing a composer and he's a composer by trade," Cameron continued. "My character talks about how difficult it can be when he gets wrapped up in his art and I do know what that's like. Sometimes I look at Mike and know that he's writing a song in his head and not necessarily listening to me at that exact moment."

Despite those mostly universal moments of spousal disconnect, Cameron believes their real life closeness has helped with a very challenging script.

"It's basically a two-person play," Mahler said. "There's other people in the show, but they play our inner voices. All of the scenes are the two of us so it's been a lot to tackle."

"It was daunting to look at 80 pages of script and know that you're one of two people who have lines," Cameron said. "The chemistry is there and in terms of knowing each other so well. We know each other's rhythms. If there's a moment when I'm on shaky ground, then Mike can see I need help because we read each other's facial expressions pretty well."

As a director with limited time to rehearse a complex script, Berry sites his cast's professionalism as a saving grace.

"I was blessed with two actors in the primary parts and six actors in the supporting parts that came in very, very ready to work," Berry said. "They had done their homework. They come in with a real, sound familiarity for the music and I certainly couldn't have pulled it off had they not worked as they had."

All agree the play, which was first produced in Los Angeles in 1978 and was subsequently nominated for four Tonys and five Drama Desk Awards, is a gem of a show, from the Neil Simon book to the Hamlisch/Bayer Sayer music.

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"It's the story of two people who are perfect for each other but don't know it and can't seem to figure it out until the end. I think it's a universal story for anyone who's had to balance a work relationship with a romantic relationship."

Berry thinks the success or failure of directing a Neil Simon play depends on looking beyond the written page to get in touch with characters theatergoers can relate to.

"Although it's light and funny on the page, the most challenging thing is to ... make sure the couple onstage come off as real people who are experiencing real things," Berry said. "So I think the biggest challenge is that there's a lot of depth and pathos in any relationship and Neil Simon writes some very real people."

As far as the score goes, there are no big production numbers and no hits that arose from the score. Instead, the professions of the two lead characters naturally drive the music, rather than the traditional stop in the action to sing.

"It's a good musical for people who don't like musicals," Mahler said.

"I didn't know the score before I was working on the show but it's really a gem of a score," said Cameron.

"It's challenging because I want to pay homage to Neil Simon and Marvin Hamlisch and Carol Bayer Sager because they all wrote a pretty pitch perfect show; one of those shows where you can tell each word was decided upon very carefully," Coleman said.

Tickets are \$29-\$39 and dinner show packages are available. For details, see foxvalleyrep.org

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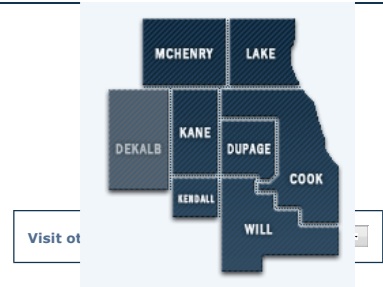
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