

REVIEW--When in Rome

by Mary Winsky

Although a fabulous eleven-day HH trip to Italy is advertised for fall, four audiences got to go to Rome this week for a spectacular and energetic preview. *When in Rome* transported us. Directed and produced by Bets Knepley, performed by twenty-nine talented and courageous actors, and enabled by the tireless behind-the-scene efforts of scores of others, the farcical feminist social class love story was perhaps the most extravaganza in the Heritage Hunt Little Theater history.

Historically set in Ancient Rome, wonderfully staged by Goldie Grandy and Joey Wagner, musically directed by Jim Campbell, and choreographed by Lynn Levvis, the ballroom crackled with exotic energy. Add to those essentials the over-the-top costume creations of Pat Dews, and we were in for a colorful evening. Sandy Iasiello was the transformational makeup consultant and Lloyd King, Alan Mager and Dave Milbradt, the architects of scenery. Sound was thanks to Bill Whyte and lighting thanks to Obie Dugan, both supported and assisted by the HH LSTV crew. A creative team for sure.

While this team sewed and hammered and engineered and shaped and painted and lit, Bets and Goldie did programs and publicity, Ed Knepley worked his photo magic, Elena Portoles and Carol Katchmark sold us tickets and Treva Whyte and Dot Schuetze planned our dinners. Thus taken care of, the audience could sit back and enjoy, and the actors could stand up and entertain.

And entertained we were from the first mysterious chant of the Muses. These Roman Goddesses, MJ Brickach, Denny Cumber, Joan DeBell, Beth Harrington, Ellie Rewald and Phyllis Shrader, lifted and transitioned us with their songs, then threw off their monastic blue robes to reveal lavender satin, outrageous big-hair wigs and slinky boas. Their voices were excellent, as were the steps and cheer leading of pink-satin dancers Pat Boggs, Pat Dews, Natalie June and Treva Whyte. Vendors Ed Baier, Jane Becker, Lloyd King, Art Moscatello and Dot Schuetze and soldiers Jim Burwell and Bob Rewald peopled the stage in realistically imaginative costumes, surrounding the leads with the entourage they deserved.

Thus surrounded, our "hero," Gladius, a young peasant, played by Rick Sullivan, is able to rob Helen Kriegel in the market place. Bamboozled by his buddy Minimus, vibrantly acted by Tina Mullins, the confused lady is unable to identify Gladius and he is off the hook. But he is soon enamored of the pretty princess and daughter of the emperor, played brilliantly by Sandy Mills. Helen Esposito, as Julia, a peasant girl and accomplice to "Mini" and "Gladius" (Aren't those girls' names?), is a fabulous plebeian contrast to the shiny blond princess. Pearly, curly-haired Joyce Mancini is loyal maid to the princess and Dot Shuetze her attendant.

And well she need their support when confronted by the booming voiced Senator Altilus, played by Murray Schooner, and growled at by the brutish Brudis, played by Sil Zinacola, a fierce gladiator and intimidating lout. But alas, the princess must marry this brute if he defeats Gladius in the gladiator games which the public, encouraged by DJ Art Moscatello, insists upon. Other ardent supporters of this barbaric contest are the senators' wives who have formed a "grroupp."

Led by the verbose Verbalina, hysterically portrayed by Nanette Ross, sexy Impella, Yvonne Stathis, shy Sasilla, Janice Zinicola, and flaky Laffina, Helen Kriegel, these aristocrats want to sell lizards on a stick and other memorabilia at the games.

The intelligent and headstrong princess dismisses these trivial pursuits, and constantly sends messages trying to stop the contest to her emperor father via exhausted messenger, played convincingly by Jim Campbell. Gladius, though befriended by Fina, played by Jane Becker, and trained by Julia, is less than confident. Smitten by the princess, he endears himself to her, and when Mini's potions are reversed, fights an uneven fight with the bellowing Brudis. Finally, the princess lands a lucky punch and Brudis falls. The repulsive Senator Altilus agrees to marry Gladius and the princess.

Imagining a happily-ever-after life for this mismatched couple is a stretch for the most optimistic audience. But surrounded by song, dance and well-meaning plebes and aristocrats alike, we are swept into applause for the improbable underdog romance.

We leave Rome happy and full, thankful, once again to the HHLT for When in Rome, their latest and most extravagant gift.