Michaud turns in star performance in ‘Anything Goes’

By CHRISTA MARTIN
features@santacruzsentinel.com

With musical theater, anything goes — spontaneous song and dance, goofy gags and over-the-top (or underwhelming) acting. After all, it’s about the musical side of things, right?

So when a performance shatters the campy reputation that musicals can sometimes carry, a critic takes notice.

Such was the case on opening night last week of Cabrillo Stage’s summer production of “Anything Goes.” The obvious standout star of the show — a woman who can sing, dance, and act realistically on stage — was Brianna Michaud, who plays the part of fast-talking nightclub singer Reno Sweeney. Locals will be impressed — Michaud is a longtime Santa Cruzan.

Her performance was dazzling and the audience gave her a well-deserved standing ovation at the curtain call. Her mad skills on stage made this one of my most memorable Cabrillo Stage experiences.

The story, for those who don’t know it, goes like this: A cruise ship casts off. On board are a bunch of wacky characters. There’s Sweeney, of course, and her pal, Billy Crocker (played by the equally talented Andrew Ceglio). Billy has a thing for Hope Harcourt (Nina Feliciano) and he’s trying to woo her, but she’s about to be married to Sir Evelyn Oakleigh (Robert Coverdell). Meanwhile, there’s a gangster looming (Max Bennett-Parker) and his sidekick Erma (Anethra Mora). A bunch of other folks are taking the ride, too, but the crux of the story revolves around this handful of players.

As the title of the play suggests, anything goes on board this Love Boat of sorts: Crime, mistaken identities, star-crossed lovers and more.

And while Michaud is by far the highlight of the acting troupe, Ceglio’s charisma and talent pops on stage, as does that of Bennett-Parker.

Coverdell offers an audience favorite with the song and dance number, “The Gypsy In Me.”

Not to be outshone, though, are the glowing results of the hard-working crew. Skip Epperson has once again created a dynamic set. His cruise ship, which folds and unfolds like a dollhouse, is stunning. I’m always mesmerized by his ability to create such majestic backdrops. Likewise, as a fashion junkie and a sucker for throwback fuchs, I delighted in the era-specific costumes created by Maria Crush.

The choreography felt a little flat through the first act until the final number before intermission — “Anything Goes.” Director/choreographer Kikau Alvaro created a jaw-dropping dance routine with this piece, which carried through to present powerhouse dancing in the second act. Likewise, Alvaro did an impressive job with his directorial debut at Cabrillo Stage. Other than a few opening night sound glitches, the production was seamless.

Lastly, while they’re tucked out of sight in the pit, the orchestra deserves due praise. With conductor (and Cabrillo Stage artistic director) Jon Nordgren at the helm, the music is a character unto its own, providing the backdrop for a cast of beautiful voices.

For Michaud, though, anything goes. And while it’s a shame she’s not headed to New York (we asked, she’s not interested in the big city), we’re lucky — the songbird plans to keep her remarkable talents local.

“Anything Goes” plays at Cabrillo Stage through Aug. 19. For tickets, visit cabrillocstage.com or call 479-6154.