Dance, diversity shine in Cabrillo’s fizzy “La Cage Aux Folles”

In celebration of the end of DOMA, and the repeal of Proposition 8, Cabrillo Stage launches its 2013 summer musical season with a lavish, light-hearted production of “La Cage Aux Folles.” Based on the groundbreaking 1978 French film comedy, one of the earliest depictions in modern pop culture of a sympathetic gay couple in a long-term domestic relationship, the show was first produced in 1980 with a book by Harvey Fierstein and music and lyrics by the legendary Jerry Herman.

The Cabrillo production is directed and choreographed by CSU veteran Janie Scott for maximum crowd-pleasing. The story is set in and around a popular drag nightclub in Saint-Tropez in the south of France, so there's plenty of opportunity for big, elaborate dance numbers, which is where this production shines. Some other aspects of the production can be a bit uneven, but as long as the eight-man (plus one anatomically correct female) troupe of chorus "girls," called Les Cagelles, are onstage, the show is great fun.

On the French Riviera sits the famed nightclub, La Cage Aux Folles. (Literal translation from the French is "Cage of Madwomen," and a large biceptude figure in one of the show's best numbers is the owner-protagonist and emcee is Georges (stapper Curt Denham, who has a great singing voice and an easy, affable onstage presence), whose longtime companion is the club's star attraction, Albin, performing under the stage name, Zaza (Tony Panighetti)).スーペールジュース and the more flamboyant Albin have been together for 20-plus years, and are well known and loved in their community.

Georges' 24-year-old son from a one-night indiscretion, Jean-Michel (the likable Curtis Reynoldson), whom Georges and Albin have raised from infancy, comes home to announce to his parents that he's getting married. Once they get over the shock that his intended is a woman, Georges and Albin are eager to welcome her into the family. The only problem is, her father is a right-wing bigot who runs an organization called TFM (Traditional Family and Morality). Afraid of losing the woman he loves, Jean-Michel begs his father to call off the long-awaited blood mother and pretend to be in a "normal" marriage with her just for one day, so the bride's parents can meet their future in-laws without incident—a ruse that will also exclude the easily hurt Albin.

This plot has its ups and downs, but it doesn't interfere much with the entertaining production numbers onstage at the club, especially in the show’s more dynamic first half. The rousing opening, “We Are What We Are,” introduces Les Cagelles to fine effect. Alex Alvarez as whip-cracking Hannah from Hamburg, Robert Coverdale's Chantal, and Danny Dwane Wells as Lars Mordelle, were among my favorites, but they are all wonderful. (Special kudos are also due to CSU stalwart Jarrod Washington in a funny bit as accident-prone stage manager Francis.)

Les Cagelles are also in fine form in their terrific black feathered Maria Crush costumes, prowling around their giant bicep figure, then launching into an acrobatic cancan in the first act finale, “La Cage Aux Folles,” which leads into Albin's poignant power ballad, "I Am What I Am." But the energy flags in the second half, which is all about the doomed meet-the-parents plot. Danielle Williams as perky Anne, Jean-Michel's fiancée, Benjamin Holick as her dyspeptic dad and Mindy Pedlar as his oppressed wife all work hard, but their scenes hadn't quite gelled on opening night. (In particular, the multi-part ensemble number "Cocktail Counterpoint" needs a bit more polish.) But the nightclub finale, with Les Cagelles on roller skates, brings the audience to its feet.

Skip Epperson's stylish sets and Kyle Grant's jazzy lighting are especially effective in the nightclub scenes. And Sammy Lopez makes a fun, campy feast out of the role of wassaple wannabe shoegirl Jacob. But the play's trump card is its portrayal of tender affection between an egging couple who have been together for a long time, and this production does not disappoint on that score. Although Panghetti sang a little flat on opening night, he delivers a game and heartfelt performance as Albin, and he is partnered beautifully by the gallant Denham. Their touching relationship is the foundation from which this lively production takes flight.

"La Cage Aux Folles" plays through Aug. 11 at Cabrillo College's Crocker Theatre, 6500 Soquel Drive, Aptos. For ticket information, call 479-9154 or visit cabrillogastage.com.

Photos: Jana Marcus