Cabrillo Stage packs the spectacle into ‘La Cage’

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There’s much to appreciate about Cabrillo Stage’s production of “La Cage Aux Folles” — which has the advantage of opening shortly after the recent Supreme Court ruling about the rights of same-sex couples to marry — so it seems a bad call to grumble about its shortcomings.

It certainly has spectacle — tons of it — in particular the amazing cancan dance that dazzles the audience and goes on longer than any dancer should have to endure. These dancers also tap, perform a number on roller skates, and swirl around large white feather fans. The costumes, especially for the gangly, athletic Les Cagelles (the mostly male impersonators appearing at the nightclub), are stunning, the rainbow-skirted cancan outfits most of all.

Anyone who hasn’t been marooned at sea for the past 30 years knows the storyline of “La Cage,” which is surprisingly more about love and strong family ties than it is about drag queens. Since it opened on Broadway in 1983 (receiving nine Tony nominations and winning six), “La Cage” has spawned numerous productions all over the world, and has already had two Broadway revivals (in 2004 and 2010). A non-musical version was the basis for the 1996 Robin Williams film “The Birdcage,” which was, in turn based on a 1973 French play by Jean Poiret.

But when Harvey Fierstein and Jerry Herman concocted this musical, it took on a life of its own for its gentle story about a gay couple who have been together more than 20 years. La Cage nightclub owner Georges (a heartfelt performance by debonair Curt Denham) is the calming, sensible half of the twosome while Albin (a surprisingly subdued Tony Panighetti) is the flamboyant, mood-swinging half, who, as Zaza, is the star performer at Georges’ nightclub.

Denham is simply terrific, and his smooth, powerful vocals provide the musical with what gravitas it has. While Panighetti sometimes has the right tone as the tempestuous diva; often he is too tentative and doesn’t give Denham enough to respond to. He might try smiling a little more because when he looks angry or hurt, “he doesn’t look at all like a ‘she.’” He does an amazing job of putting on gobs of makeup while singing “A Little More Masculine” in Act I as well as his duet with Denham of “With You on My Arm.” But his rendition of the powerful “I Am What I Am” seems lackluster.

Panighetti did, however, have to deal with a couple of costume mishaps on Saturday night, and that unattractive bathrobe with the gapping arm holes he wears in Act I should be replaced. It elicited gasps from the audience.

Several performers offer the audience some delightful surprises, particularly the impish, droll Sammy Lopez as the maid/butler Jacob. Whenever Lopez glides, skips or pirouettes on stage in his cutesy ballerina or other feminine costumes, it’s impossible to take focus off of him. His movements are swift, precise and always hilariously funny.

In Act 2, Benjamin Holck and Mindy Pedlar are standouts as the stuffy, conservative couple, Mr. and Mrs. Dindon, who just happen to be the parents of the young girl Georges and Albin’s son, Jean-Michel (earnest, sincere Curtis Reynolds) intends to marry. When they discover that Albin is actually Zaza, they literally let their hair down (or, in Holck’s case, put on a wig and evening gown) and show their more liberal side.

As restaurant owner Jacqueline, Robin DiCello exhibits an authentic French accent and she sings beautifully, but someone should advise her to look elsewhere other than directly at the audience when she’s speaking to other members of the cast.

Jarrod Washington is a great comedic addition as the put-upon stage manager Francis who is always getting injured as a result of dating the German Cagelle, Hanna (a fascinating, dynamic Alex Alvarez). Danny Dwaine Wells II as Cagelle Mercedes performs some startlingly athletic dance feats that drew “awes” from the audience.

Unfortunately, some of the Cagelles are not nearly attractive enough — and they don’t walk and move as gracefully as women — to be truly believable. That’s one of the conceits of this show: They are all supposed to be so beautiful that it’s a complete surprise when they take off their fancy hats and reveal whether they are actually male or female. This isn’t in the Cabrillo production presumably because, for most of the numbers, there is only one female Cagelle.

While parts of this production lack energy, overall its imperfections are small. Director/choreographer Janie Scott has done a more than satisfactory job of juggling the many diverse balls that make up this technically difficult musical. Maria Crush’s costumes — in particular the ones for the dancers — are striking (although their black bird outfits are a little creepy). Skip Epperson’s art deco set design for the nightclub is the real deal. He cleverly finds a way to transform Georges and Albin’s eclectic living room into something resembling a church parsonage in preparation for the visit of the Dindons.

Musical director Daniel Goldsmith and conductor Jon Nordgren keep things moving musically, thanks to the 20-plus piece orchestra that breathes life into much-loved songs like “With You on My Arm,” “I Am What I Am,” as well as the poignant “Look Over There” and “The Best of Times.” Although there is neither a harp nor a xylophone listed in the program, somehow those instruments can be heard clearly.

Kyle Grant’s lighting is consistently effective, and while the sound system had a few miscues (particularly during Reynolds’ duet with Denham in the first act), most of the dialogue and songs are understandable.

If you’ve never seen “La Cage Aux Folles,” take advantage of this opportunity to view an atypical slice of life in St. Tropez on the French Riviera before it closes Aug. 11. And remember: What happens in a nightclub stays in a nightclub.