

# Review: Geva Theatre's timeless farce 'La Cage aux Folles' is a comedic and visual wonder



Mark Cuddy as Georges with the Cagelles in Geva Theatre Center's production of "La Cage aux Folles." GOAT FACTORY MEDIA ENTERTAINMENT

Opening night is always a high-stakes endeavor. But with Geva Theatre Center's production of "La Cage aux Folles," the stakes must have felt a little higher than usual on Saturday. It was the first opening night of the season, and it also kicked off Artistic Director Mark Cuddy's 25th year at Geva, with him starring in the show and acting in his first musical. Perhaps most important, it's "La Cage" — an ambitious, madcap extravaganza served with a sea of sequins and a metric ton of mascara.

Well, if anybody at Geva was nervous before the opening, they're breathing easier now. The show's nonstop energy and visual splendor grabbed hold of the audience immediately and never let go. The laughs came easily, the songs were pleasing and the acting was moving.

But what makes this "La Cage" more than merely a solid musical farce is the brilliant look of it as well as the drag show within the show.

Set in a nightclub in St. Tropez, "La Cage" tells the story of Georges and Albin, two men who've been together for decades. Georges owns the nightclub and emcees a drag show cabaret. Albin stars in the show as Zaza with her accompanying Cagelles — six extremely fit female impersonators who appear to either have amazing razor technology or have logged serious time at the waxing salon.

Watching the Cagelles do their high-kicking dance numbers in heels and showgirl plumage is mesmerizing and at times very funny.

Although his résumé — until now — didn't include song-and-dance man, Cuddy delivered a professional performance as Georges. But it was his counterpart, Albin, played by Danny Vaccaro, who literally brought the crowd to its feet with his moving, striking rendition of "I Am What I Am."

Vaccaro can really sing, and he provides some of the strongest moments in “La Cage.” He also embodies Zaza so fully that when he performs a bit of bawdy cabaret-style standup, it’s amusing enough that one wishes we could stay there a lot longer.

Before the opening, Cuddy said the production received some consultation from longtime Rochester drag queens Kasha Davis and Aggy Dune. The preparation is evident as the cast seems to understand drag show as an art form quite well.

Another strength of the show is its overall look. To make “La Cage” happen, Geva needed to raise extra funding, and the extra investment can be seen on stage. As Cuddy described it in an interview a week before opening night, “The biggest challenge was scale of the spectacle.”

In the spectacle department, this production — from set design to lighting to wardrobe — does not disappoint.

Costumes alone were drawing audible “ooohs” and “aaahs” from the audience. And a great deal of the fun in the musical is waiting to see who next bursts through the door dressed in yet another outlandish outfit. It all adds up to a dream-like neon aquarium so inviting that it’s almost a shame it couldn’t run during the darkest days of winter when Rochester could especially use the brightness.

Based on the 1970s French play of the same name, the musical version of “La Cage aux Folles” debuted on Broadway in 1983 and hit it big, winning six Tony Awards including Best Musical. But 36 years later, can a show that satirizes intolerance of homosexuals and drag queens still hold its comedic edge?

The answer is yes, in large because “La Cage’s” plot and script is inherently funny. It gets rolling when Georges’ son — the result of a one-time heterosexual dalliance — announces he’s getting married and aims to introduce his fiancée and her ultra-conservative, politician parents to his family. So they need somehow to portray themselves as a “normal” heterosexual family and certainly not gay owners of a drag club. Very little goes as planned, of course. The comedic pace builds and the emotional payoff feels as vital as ever.

The only dated moment — and it is just a moment — in the show comes from the conservative father, who the script has overreacting to learning that someone is homosexual. Yes, there are still anti-gay politicians in the world. But they have at least learned to be less obvious about their intolerance, usually even refusing to admit they’re anti-gay despite their voting record. The actor, James Michael Reilly, seems to understand this. He delivers the line with what sounds like a hyperbolic Nixon impression, as if to level with the audience that, yes, this is a caricature.

Part of the genius of “La Cage” and why it will likely further stand the test of time is that it accepts everyone right where they are and then simply demands that they deal with each other. There are no speeches about persecution or one’s inalienable right to pursue one’s happiness or even, “Can’t we just live and let live?” No, “La Cage” was long past that even in 1983. Rather, the mission here seems to be to find joy in the characters’ discomfort with each other — with the emphasis on joy.