

**STAGE REVIEW**

# 'Nanette' Brings Frivolity to Long Beach

By SCOTT COLLINS  
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Early in NO, NO, NANETTE, the title character is warned to avoid flappers "who think life is one long giggle."

Those flapper girls have nothing on NO, NO, NANETTE, the 1920s musical so light and frothy it makes "42nd Street" look like Greek tragedy.

High kicks and soft-shoe, lame jokes and *Tea for Two* - these foolish things have sustained Vincent Youmans' three-act lollipop, off and on, for the past 70 years. It is not the oldest musical in American theater history, but at times it certainly feels that way.

Long Beach Civic Light Opera has mounted a lavishly appointed, cheerfully acted revival of Burt Shevelove's celebrated adaptation, an improbable hit on Broadway in the early '70s. Revised or not, NANETTE feels very out of step with the dark, literary musicals of the Sondheim era. Whether that's welcome depends on one's need for one long giggle.

Blind optimism reigns supreme in Otto Harbach and Frank Mandel's book, a high-pitched Jazz Age farce that wasn't embarrassed by its own fixation on the high life. "Go out and spend some money foolishly," advises rich Bible publisher Jimmy Smith (Gavin MacLeod of "Love Boat")



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Kaye Ballard, foreground, Shell Grossman in NO, NO, NANETTE

fame). "That'll make you happy."

As with everything else in NANETTE, Smith's comment is not meant ironically. The piece, the program notes inform us, is about "what was (in the 1920s) topical, slightly racy and mostly sheer fun.

Accordingly, teen-age Nanette (Elna Marie Binckes) grows restless under the tutelage of her guardians; the tycoon, Smith, and his frugal wife, Sue (Nanette Fabray). "I want to raise a family," the girl tells her suitor, a dull lawyer named Tom (Michael Dotson), "but I want to raise a little hell first."

Smith, meanwhile, has been making some mischief of his own, giving cash gifts to attractive young women who imagine his interest in them is more than platonic (it isn't).

For no very good reason, everyone winds up at the beach in Atlantic City as the show gives new meaning to the term "light opera."

Director and choreographer David Thome has staged this nonsense with the right amount of pluck, even if the show never quite reaches "Hellzapoppin" levels of giddiness. Due to the immense size of the Terrace Theater, the action is broad and heavily amplified.

The show is at its best when the cast members shut up and dance. The superb tap routine for *I Want to Be Happy*, with Fabray and chorus, almost brings down the house; likewise the elaborate soft-shoe for the immortal *Tea for Two*. Sean McMullin's period costumes - flapper hats, pleated skirts, golf sweaters - are definite pluses.

As a wisecracking maid, Kaye Ballard gets a lot of comic mileage out of a stock role. Fabray puts the right addled, oblivious spin on her aristocratic East Coast matron. MacLeod, who has an endearing way of talk-singing through numbers, is completely unconvincing as a slightly daffy tycoon; which means, of course, that he's perfect for the part.

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## No, No, Nanette

Produced by Barry Brown for the Long Beach Civic Light Opera, The Terrace Theatre, 300 E. Ocean Blvd., Long Beach, (312) 365-3500. Opened July 7; plays Tues. - Sat, 8; Sat. - Sun. 3; closes July 24.

To give credit where credit is due: the production values of *No, No, Nanette* (the final offering of Long Beach Civic Light Opera's 1993/94 season) are first-rate across the board. The ageless Nanette Fabray, who's been performing non-stop since she was three years old, continues to captivate audiences with her charm while she amazes them with her effortless tap-dance agility. Perfectly cast as Sue Smith, Fabray embodies the naive wife of Mr. Smith, a wealthy Bible

"Tea for Two," followed by the entire company doing various soft-shoe renditions to the melody (choreography and direction are both by David Thome).

Dennis Castellano's musical direction is always top-notch, Robert L. Smith's set is charming; Sean Mc-Mullin's 1920's flapper costumes are snazzy, and Lawrence Oberman's lighting is right on target. As for the Harbach/Mandel book, forget it. Some works stand the passage of time (*Porgy & Bess*, another 1925 musical, is as meaningful today as it was when it was written) and others don't.

*Shirle Gottlieb*

Gavin MacLeod, Nanette Fabray, and Kaye Ballard in 'No, No, Nanette'



publisher whose sole mission in life is to make other people happy so that he can be happy. ("I Want To Be Happy" is the theme song of the show.)

Gavin MacLeod plays her lovable husband Jimmy in the same bumbling style he perfected as Captain of *The Love Boat*; and the inimitable Kaye Ballard is once again a crowd-pleaser with her feisty, comedic talents and sure sense of timing. In this dated Harbach/Mandel/Youmans/Caesar musical (adapted in 1970 by Burt Shevelove), she plays Pauline the maid, an ersatz member of the family.

Dynamite singing and dancing are performed by Tracy Lore as Lucille (Sue's sultry best friend), and Steve Moore as her husband (Jimmy's best buddy and attorney). Both are seasoned, multi-talented, highly charged actors who electrify the stage whenever they appear, (especially the "You Can With Any Girl At All" routine, and Lore's torchy blues solo, which is unarguably the high point of this production.

The pivotal part of the overly-protected young girl who isn't allowed to do anything (hence the title) is charmingly performed by LBCLO newcomer Elna Marie Binckes. All she wants to do is go to Atlantic City with a gaggle of her friends — and the answer, of course, is "no, no!" Tom, the young man of her dreams, is portrayed by Michael Dotson (last seen in LBCLO's production of *South Pacific*). These two love-birds sing the old-fashioned ballad,



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**TEA FOR TWO:** Long Beach Civic Light Opera has mounted a lavishly appointed, cheerfully acted revival of "No, No, Nanette," starring Elna Marie Binckes and Michael Dotson. Reviewed by Scott Collins. **F9**