

World premiere musical ‘Trapped’ worth catching at PTC Featured

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(photo courtesy Penobscot Theatre Company/Bill Kuykendall)

BANGOR - One of Maine’s most vital industries is getting the musical treatment via a world premiere production at Penobscot Theatre Company.

“Trapped! The Musical” - subtitled “A Lobster Tale” - is the brainchild of Larrance Fingerhut (music) and Andy Eninger (book & lyrics), building on a story conceived by both. Directed by Anneliese Toft with musical direction by Fingerhut, the show is receiving its first-ever production on the Bangor Opera House Stage, where it is set to run through March 5.

“Trapped!” is the story of a small island town in Maine, a place where lobster is king and not much ever really changes. But when the forces of the outside world start to infringe on this bucolic place, the locals are torn. Should they stay in the past? Or should they embrace the future? And does it have to be one or the other?

In many ways, the show is a love letter, exploring the joys and woes that come with small-town life. That affection is clear and abiding, permeating the entire production. With toe-tapping songs, high-energy choreography, loads of jokes and some outstanding production values - not to mention a dynamite ensemble cast - this show will have you yearning for the salty spray and honest ache of a day spent hauling traps out on the water.

In the tiny island town of Crusty Isle, lobster fishing is the primary industry. There are a lot of great lobstermen out there, but the best of the best is Harry Krabbe (Ira Kramer), whose family has been fishing these waters for generations. Harry’s sister Kitty (Nellie Kelle) has shown some aptitude for the family business, though their mother Caroline (A.J. Mooney) wants her daughter to find her way into some other line of work. Harry’s closest pal is Seth (Ben Layman), a longtime lobsterman who was best friends with Harry’s late father back in the day.

But the winds of change are blowing.

Dr. Isabella “Izzy” Mundt (Marie Anello) is one of the most renowned scientists in her field, a rock star in the world of marine biology. She’s a workaholic and a bit obsessive, but she’s turned those traits into significant success. However, even rock star scientists need funding. That’s where Billy Divagio (Doug Meswarb) comes in. He’s a billionaire who has taken an interest in Izzy’s work (and more to the point, in Izzy herself), which has led to him providing the resources she needs, up to and including a tough-talking assistant named Butch (Michelle Zink-Munoz).

Billy has enlisted Izzy in his efforts to create something he’s calling “Lobster World,” a combination marine research facility/theme park. Izzy has her doubts, but the possibilities opened up by the opportunity are too big to ignore. Specifically, she might finally be able to track down and properly study the legendary superlobster that she has been pursuing for years.

Crusty Isle might be the perfect place for such an endeavor, but the town is very much divided on the project. There are those who are seeking something bigger than the small-town life offered there, but others are more than content with the way things are and have little interest in changing. These diametrically opposed viewpoints generate more than a little conflict. And all the while, floating just beneath the surface, strange and shadowy doings are afoot.

With so many people with so many different motivations - some selfless, others selfish - it only stands to reason that things might get a little complicated. Can some common ground (er, sea) be found? Sure, there’s value to be found in material success, but at what cost? How high a price is too high? Can the people of Crusty Isle bring in a big haul ... of happiness?

“Trapped!” is a delight, a fun and full-throated musical comedy packed with humor and heart. You’ve got some workplace comedy vibes, a couple of charming love stories, a sprinkling of class struggle and a bit of intrigue to go with some big, broad dance numbers and a soundtrack of top-notch songs. People will sometimes say that a show has everything, but seriously - this show has EVERYTHING.

The opportunity to experience a theatrical work for the very first time is a rare one. There’s something so exciting about engaging with a world premiere work. No one has seen what you are seeing on any other stage. This is the debut production and you get to be in the audience. I don’t care who you are, that’s pretty cool.

Of course, it helps when the piece in question is as good as this one. Fingerhut and Eninger have created something lovely here, a light and charming romp that manages to stay emotionally grounded even as it occasionally veers toward (and occasionally fully into) absurdity. It’s a delicate balance, but the writers manage to strike it.

Kudos too to director Toft, who has been given the privilege/challenge of shepherding this new work into production. Directing a world premiere means that you are operating without a roadmap; no one has done this before, so you are laying the groundwork from scratch. Toft proves up to the task, breathing life into the world of Crusty Isle. Finding the tonal groove with a show like this is tough, but Toft finds ways to deftly move from silliness to sincerity and back again. Combine that with Fingerhut’s musical direction and Danielle Barrett’s clever choreography and you’ve got something special.

Let’s talk about the songs, shall we? They’re good across the board, although I’ll concede that I had a couple of personal highlights. There’s a wonderful song called “Becoming” that will melt even the most cynical of hearts. The opening number is a real s–t-kicker in the best possible way. We get a couple of great love duets and an excellent “I’m the bad guy” song. Oh, and the second-act curtain raiser - which I will not spoil by describing (and honestly, you’d probably think I was describing a weird dream even if I did) - is one hell of a surprise.

(Shout out to the band, by the way - Marisa Solomon (cello), Cliff Guthrie (clarinet), Tom Libby (drums) and Fingerhut on piano. They’re awesome. Full stop.)

“Trapped!” features a phenomenal cast as well. Ira Kramer is perfectly cast as the garrulous Harry Krabbe, endowing the lobsterman with a vivacious and seemingly unending energy. In his hands, Harry is a perpetual motion machine, a relentless blend of ambition, charm and naivete. Anello, a newcomer to the PTC stage, is a delight as Izzy. She combines comedic chops (she’s somewhat reminiscent of Tina Fey, both physically and vibes-wise) with an absolutely exceptional voice. The two of them together light up the stage - shades of classic screwball comedy.

They’re far from alone, of course. PTC mainstays Ben Layman and A.J. Mooney deliver the kinds of quality performance we’ve come to expect from them, with each of them embracing an inherent familiarity with the archetypes they’re embodying while also offering their own unique spins. Don’t take them for granted - we’re lucky to have them. Doug Meswarb gleefully gnaws the scenery in his return to the PTC stage after nearly a decade away; he seems to be having a wonderful time. Ditto Michelle Zink-Ramos, who nicely captures that sense of being the only one who REALLY knows what’s going on. There’s an ever-so-slightly winking quality to her that works well. And Nellie Kelly is outstanding as Kitty, encapsulating every young woman who has had to face down obstacle after obstacle to achieve her goals. Her Kitty is sweet and charming, but with the flinty edge that so many small-town women carry; she absolutely nails it.

PTC’s run of production excellence continues - no surprise there. Scenic designer Dan Bilodeau’s work really brings to life the Crusty Isle waterfront while also maintaining the flexibility necessary for multiple locations. It is elaborate and detailed and aesthetically sharp. Kyle Anderson’s lighting design is absolutely lovely, playing with shadows and colors to saturate or mute the space as needed. The synergy between the two designs is a real pleasure to see. Costume designers Janet Sussman and Alexis Foster have done wonderful work in evoking small-town island fashion (along with a couple of very big and VERY impressive swings that I - again - refuse to spoil). The size and shape of the set, as well as the placement of the band, presented a unique set of challenges for sound designer Neil Graham, but he rose to meet them. And a special shout out to props designer Mary Clark, who had a ton to do - some of it quite weird - yet nailed the entire thing.

“Trapped! The Musical” is a joyful experience, one that will likely be well-received by a community that very much enjoys seeing itself reflected on this stage. This is a show that looks great and sounds great, driven by an elite ensemble and a vivid design vision brought to fruition by the best production team in the business. This is a show with plenty of laughs, a few tears ... and a giant heart.

You really ought to catch this one, and I promise you won’t want to throw it back.

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