

Review: ‘The Book of Merman’ at DC Arts Center

by [Guest Author](#) on November 19, 2017



Review by Jason Williams

Playfully tagged as a less expensive alternative to *The Book of Mormon*, which it satirizes, *The Book of Merman* quickly moves beyond just being a parody of the aforementioned award-winning Broadway hit. Written by Leo Schwartz and originally performed in 2015 Landless Theatre Company’s production of *The Book of Merman* is a musical story all its own, both enjoyable and engaging on multiple levels.



(l-r) Charles W Johnson (Elder Shumway), Ally Jenkins (Ethel), and Ernie Achenbach (Elder Braithwaite). Photo courtesy of Landless Theatre Company.

Similar to *The Book of Mormon*, *The Book of Merman* centers on the misadventure of two Salt Lake City Latter-day Saints pounding the pavement and sharing the gospel. After a particularly tough day, the duo Elder Braithwaite, played by Ernie Achenbach, and Elder Shumway, played by Charles Johnson, resolve to knock on one more door before they call it a day. What is apparent from lights up is Achenbach and Johnson have incredible stage chemistry. The character of Elder Braithwaite is written as a through-and-through optimist, while Elder Shumway is more cynical. However, as Johnson and Achenbach harmonize

tones on duets like “My Heart’s Someplace Else” or trade their versions of swear words, these characters move back and forth from sugar sweet to salty, as they work through the tension of the narrative. Neither Shumway nor Braithwaite have a monopoly on wit, sassiness, doubt, or boldness; each gives *The Book of Merman* great balance from start to finish.

And then there is Ethel Merman. Merman is played wonderfully by Ally Jenkins. Even if you walk into *The Book of Merman* not completely clued into the deep and rich history of one of the silver screen and stage remarkable leading ladies you will be okay. Jenkins and the musical will introduce you to the full-on Ethel Merman experience. As fate would have it, Merman is Shumway and Braithwaite’s last door of the day. They meet as the actress is heading out to run an important errand and their collective journey starts. “Be a Merman” is a traffic number where all three actors display their wonderful voices and comedic timing. The numbers in this musical are substantial: center of the stage, low light, full voice, toe-tapping, applause-demanding, and hardy. Because there is a bit of history in this musical, the songs cover different time periods, so there are show tunes, jazzier songs, and ones that are ballads.

Music Director and accompanist Darin Stringer does a terrific job of supplying the music for all three performers. Stage Manager Amanda Williams should be proud of the job she did getting incredible usage of a smaller stage area with some ace repurposing of several props.

For a musical that has three principles players *The Book of Merman* never feels lacking in volume or meaningful dialogue. The musical avoids being overproduced as the lighting changes are minimal, the wardrobe changes are slight, and a narrator is not used. Director Andrew Lloyd Baughman, who is also on the leadership team of the Landless Theatre Company, allows the great aforementioned team members, in addition to Laura Martin who is the musical’s choreographer, to work together seamlessly.

Whereas *The Book of Mormon* was about the questioning of religious practices against the harsh realities faced in the Ugandan village. *The Book of Merman* has each character tussle with the sometimes diverging paths of our spiritual and earthly callings. The musical engages the subject of sexuality but stays away from striking an overly serious tone on the topic. This musical finds its resolution in a full-throated self-acceptance.

Of the 16 songs sung, the overwhelming majority are both pleasing to hear and serve to move the narrative along. There are two selections that hit peculiar notes for two different reasons. The tongue-in-cheek “If It’s Not Hard, I don’t Like It” is funny, but for conservative

viewers: its blue humor could be a bit of a jolt. Then there is a genre-stretching number by Merman, Braithwaite, and Shumway that feels like a bit of a reach even within the zero gravity universe that has been created. Nevertheless, if you are looking for a fun musical that offers a unique perspective on some important topics, that literally invites you to be a part of the show.

The Book of Merman is worth a trip to Adams Morgan. Of particular importance for readers in this space, this production is dedicated to DC Metro Theater Arts Founder and Editor Emeritus Joel Markowitz. Even if you are new to this space as I am, Joel's legacy is apparent.

Running Time: 90 minutes with no intermission.

[The Book of Merman](#) plays December 8, at the DC Arts Center- 2438 18th Street North West Washington, D.C. For tickets call 202-462-7833 purchase them [online](#).