

## Infamous Jest

Driven by Ann Crumb, Stephen Temperley's *Souvenir* lets us to have our cake and to eat it, too.

by *Mark Cofta*

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These days we're encouraged to laugh *at* more than laugh *with* (see "reality" shows, *American Idol* and all forms of humiliation-entertainment), so the story of society dame Florence Foster Jenkins' bizarre singing career feels contemporary. However, our modern affinity for self-serving self-mockery drips with cynicism and meanness — merely calculated gambits for our coveted 15-minute allotments of celebrity — while Lady Flo's unlikely fame in the 1930s and '40s is actually inspirational. Stephen Temperley's *Souvenir*, driven by Ann Crumb's masterful embodiment at the Media Theatre, allows us to have our cake and to eat it, too.

Carl Danielsen, as pianist and protector Cosme McMoon (a real name, though Temperley's version is largely fictional), lovingly explains how Lady Flo hired him to accompany her first recital. He tactfully points out her "want of accuracy," but she blithely insists that she has perfect pitch. Cowed, he compliments the "depth of her feeling," because her singing offers nothing else to praise. He expects one public performance will shame her into silence, but the audience's delight leads to a 12-year run.

Crumb's performance, all the more extraordinary because of her famous singing skills, is fully realized. Her voice bursts forth like gears grinding and brakes shrieking. Her nasal caterwauling is matched by fascinating (like a car wreck) physicalization, twisting and grimacing in musical ecstasy that suggests the throes of exorcism. Even Lady Flo's speaking is tone-deaf: She punctuates conversation with explosions of volume and pitch, gesturing like a desperate mime. If we turned off the volume — and you might want to, except that her vocalizations are so hilariously hideous — we'd still see her efforts as gloriously tortured.

Crumb never goes overboard, though, and we don't need McMoon to tell us that she's "absolutely, transparently sure of herself ... as a child might believe, she sings." As crowds flock to her recitals to giggle in amazement, McMoon, our congenial conscience, voices what we're all wondering: "How could she not know?" He worries about "when her friends would be outnumbered by those who come to laugh," when she'll finally have to face what others hear: Will it be when she listens to herself on one of her hit records, or when she (gulp) plays Carnegie Hall? "Will her folly — or madness, which ever it was — be enough to keep her safe?"

In director Jesse Cline's production, sensitively lit by Troy Martin-O'Shia, Danielsen and Crumb reveal the heart behind the humor. What's important, *Souvenir* vividly instructs, "is what you hear in your head."

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### ***Souvenir***

Through Feb. 17, Media Theatre, 104 E. State St., Media, 610-891-0100, [mediatheatre.org](http://mediatheatre.org).