



Saturday, June 28, 2008

A Media Theatre production at the Wilma Theatre,
Philadelphia, PA

The tragicomedy of only listening to one's inner voice: Two theatres creating a most extraordinary *Souvenir*

[Beethoven](#) lost his hearing and went completely deaf; yet, he composed some of the world's greatest music. Philadelphia socialite [Florence Foster Jenkins](#) (1868–1944) was born tone-deaf, unable to discriminate between different musical notes or reproduce them accurately with her voice. However, she loved classical music and wanted to share the best arias of "Mr. [Verdi](#)" and "Mr. [Mozart](#)," first with her friends, and later with an ever-growing number of people. Her fame—or notoriety—not only filled [Carnegie Hall](#) during WWII, but over 2000 people were left standing outside, unable to get tickets for an event that sold out quicker than any other concert in that venue's history.

She apparently did not realize that the reason for her success was not the beauty of her voice or the elegance of her many outfits—a new one for each song—but her missing and mangling every single note by between a quarter or a half a tone, mistakes which had the audiences shrieking with laughter and sometimes running out of the hall. She interpreted the handkerchiefs held in front of the spectators' faces as proof that she had moved them to tears, not realizing that they were instead covering their mouths, gaping open with laughter.

[Stephen Temperley](#) wrote the book and original lyrics and music for [Souvenir](#), one of the most unusual musicals I have ever seen as it demands that a highly trained singer hit the wrong notes for an entire evening—a tremendous vocal and artistic feat. The [Media Theatre](#)'s production, directed with great care and a fine eye for detail by **Jesse Cline**, became an instant success because of the combination of talents: a great Broadway singer, Tony-nominated and Barrymore-Award winning [Ann Crumb](#); Cline, one of the best artistic directors for musical theatre in the Philadelphia area; the over-the-top costumes of **Maggie Baker-Atkins**; and the superb lighting by [Troy Martin-O'Shia](#) that created two different psychological spaces on the stage: an elegant supper club in New York at the famous [Ritz-Carlton](#), where Mrs. Jenkins felt most in her element, and a darker space on the left-hand side for the asides by the pianist who shared some of his innermost worries and concerns about the ever-more popular singer who was becoming famous for the wrong reasons. As **Wendy Rosenfield**, author of the entertaining "[Drama Queen](#)" blog and one of the drama critics for the [Philadelphia Inquirer](#) aptly put it, "All this effort is conducted in the service of the show's subject, Madame Flo, wartime society songbird. Jenkins' legendary coloratura soprano made her a bird of a rather peculiar feather. She took on some of opera's most complex arias and defeated every one with her customary tone-, pitch-, and rhythm-deaf squeaks and squawks."

Of all the theatres in the area who wanted to produce this extraordinary musical, the Media Theatre secured the rights and staged a wonderful production. [Blanka Zizka](#) came to see it in Media and invited Jesse Cline and his production to stage it at the Wilma Theatre on Broad Street's [Avenue of the Arts](#) for a second run. The performance that I saw had the audience on their feet within seconds after the final curtain for a standing ovation. I then found out in talking to Crumb and **Larry Daggett**—who played Ms. Jenkins' accompanist Cosme McMoon with both charm and despair—that every single performance, both at the Media and the [Wilma Theatre](#), led to a standing ovation for the pair onstage, and by extension, to everyone involved in the production team and perhaps even the spirit of the misguided music lover from Pennsylvania who wanted to make the world a better place with her voice.

To see original images of Florence Foster Jenkins performing, click [here](#) or [here](#). To actually hear Jenkins mangling her signature "[Queen of the Night](#)" aria from Mozart's [The Magic Flute](#), click [here](#). For a performance of the same aria by Italian soprano [Luciana Serra](#), click [here](#). I wonder what Mozart and Verdi—or [American Idol](#)'s caustic [Simon Cowell](#)—would have said if they had ever heard Ms. Jenkins shredding their work to pieces, one note at a time.

From The Henrik Eger website: <http://www.henrikeger.com>