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Camelot's 'Sound of Music' hits all the right notes

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By **BILL VARBLE**

for the Mail Tribune

The thing that's always been troublesome about "The Sound of Music" is Maria's end of the deal. The Captain gets a lovely young wife who adores his kids. The von Trapp kids get a vivacious young mom who can find bliss in just gallivanting around the hills picking edelweiss.

And Maria? She gets a cranky, old martinet of a husband, seven high-maintenance stepchildren and Nazis on her trail.

In the genial revival of the Rodgers and Hammerstein classic (with a book by Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse) that opened Friday night at Camelot Theatre, the attraction for Maria is made as plain as raindrops on roses or whiskers on kittens, and it's spelled s-e-x.

When Maria (Rose Passione) and Capt. von Trapp (Don Matthews) early on dance the Ländler, a folksy forerunner of the waltz, we almost see Passione's pupils dilate with what's apparently the first rush of sexual attraction felt by this former postulant at Nonnberg Abbey. A micro-beat later, a blushing Maria registers confusion and embarrassment, draws back, and it's off to the safety of the Mother Abbess and the nuns before you could blow a sixteenth-note on a bosun's pipe.

It's a brief moment in a three-hour musical, but it gives the young Maria both motivation and an existential crisis. What should she do with these feelings (her first reaction is to deny them and take the vows)? What is God's plan for her? What's a fun-loving fraulein to do?

Under Roy Von Rains, Jr.'s direction, such matters are answered and acted with clarity. And that's no mean feat. "The Sound of Music" is a huge production in all ways: more than 30 actors, that gorgeous Rodgers and Hammerstein score, a live, six-piece orchestra.

Passione is a fine singer, and if her affection for the von Trapp moppets borders at times on unctuousness, well, that's the script. And Passione, as she radiates wholesome goodness, brings unbroken conviction to the role.

Mark B. Ropers adds counterpoint as charming family friend and self-aggrandizing producer Max Detweiler, whose easy pragmatism contrasts with both the starchy Captain and the idealistic Maria. Check out his rather cynical "No Way to Stop It" with the Captain and Elsa (Livia Genise, in a droll turn as the Captain's rich, brittle love interest until he comes to his senses).

As the Mother Abbess, that paragon of wisdom and goodness, Kris Wildman may not have much of a dramatic arc, but her singing is lights out. It's a good thing Camelot doesn't permit beverages in the theater, because Wildman's vocal climax in "Climb Ev'ry Mountain" would explode the wine glasses.

There's an old show-biz saw about never working with children. But, of course, they're cute without even trying, and here they're trying, and they do bring an audience. Julia Holden-Hunkins, already a Camelot veteran, is radiant as the eldest von Trapp daughter, Liesl, especially in the scene in which she dances with the young messenger — and possibly future Nazi Rolf — to "Sixteen Going on Seventeen" and has her first kiss.

In the second decade of the 21st century, the lightheartedness of "The Sound of Music," along with its relentless wholesomeness, is in an odd way almost unsettling. We've grown accustomed to the face of darker stuff, even in musical comedy. Rodgers and Hammerstein themselves were instrumental in deepening and expanding the Broadway musical's lexicon in such seminal shows as "Oklahoma," "Carousel" and "South Pacific."

This time around they were going for family audiences in the 1950s, with all that says. What accounts for the show's enduring popularity in the Broadway repertoire? A compelling heroine, cute kids and above all, terrific songs.

Have we mentioned the infectious "Do-Re-Me" and the witty "My Favorite Things," both of which are not just sung once but seem to keep popping up in reprise versions (nobody ever said Rodgers and Hammerstein didn't know a good thing when they had it). These get strong performances by Passione, Wildman, Matthews and the children, and lively staging by Von Rains and choreographer Rebecca K. Campbell.

The playing of the orchestra is very good indeed, without ever calling attention to itself. It's a shame we can't see them. It makes it seem almost as if they could be a recorded soundtrack. But I suspect there is simply no room for them on the stage.

"The Sound of Music" is classic spectacle with great tunes. If you're OK with '50s schmaltz, you'll probably dance out of the theater looking for Alps in which to yodel. It plays through April 14.

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