

A full house showed up to be entertained at Carroll University this weekend when Sondheim's "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum" hit the boards running. Under the competent direction of James Zager and Donna Kummer, the farcical musical came alive and delighted the supportive crowd.

Sondheim drew his inspiration from the comedic plays of Plautus, a popular Roman playwright in 200 B.C. Its wild chases, mistaken identities, pratfalls, and overall burlesque humor still amuse modern audiences. Of course once you add Sondheim's clever lyrics to the formula, you have added another dimension of pleasure.

The story is told by Pseudolus, a slave who lives with Senex and Domina, along with their son Hero and another slave called Hysterium. The second house that comprises the trio of abodes is occupied by Lycus and his entourage of prostitutes, and the third is owned by Erronius, an old man who spends most of his time looking for his two children who were stolen by pirates many years ago. The rest of the cast consists of five prostitutes and one virgin by the name of Philia, a blustery captain named Gloriosa, and three actors who transform themselves into all the other needed characters.

Zach Staszewski as Pseudolus, Bobby Schuessler as Lycus, and Keith R. Smith as Hysterium carry the weight of the comedy. They are all well cast. The three actors, Adam Hobbes, Michelle Johnson, and Logan Walsh, who take on many roles are also quite impressive.

Hero and Philia, the innocent lovers, are beautifully rendered by Michael Hollmann and Katie Binger. The vacuous look on Binger's face is perfect, especially when combined with Hero's cluelessness. Gloriosa's bluster was well captured by Dan Polaski.

The plot line is quite simple. Hero loves Philia, but she has been sold to Gloriosa. Enter Pseudolus who bargains with Hero. If Pseudolus can find a way to prevent Philia from marrying Gloriosa and delivering her to Hero, Hero must give the slave his freedom. Succeeding in this deal is fraught with obstacles, and therein lies the tale.

There is only one song that has a life of its own beyond the musical, and that is "Comedy Tonight," the tune that opens and closes the show. A few others are worth noting, though. Hero made "Love I Hear" come alive, and the quartet of Senex, Pseudolus, Lycus, and Hysterium sold the tune "Everybody Ought to Have a Maid." Gloriosa's "Bring Me My Bride" was also memorable.

The live musical ensemble was well balanced with the voices, the pacing was impeccable, the overall enjoyment was undeniable. And even though there were no musical giants in the ensemble, all the numbers were melodically pleasing. They certainly captured the comedic spirit of the piece. Though this is not necessarily the best of Sondheim's many wonderful creations, it is definitely a clever union of past and present, and the fact that it has survived for almost fifty years attests to its continued appeal. It's a pity that it only runs one weekend.