



Review by Margaret Evans

You don't have to be a Monty Python fanatic to love the Arts Center's new production of *Spamalot*. But

based on the reactions of the three Python geeks I saw it with, it sure doesn't hurt! Of course, I was laughing non-stop, too, and I have merely a passing acquaintance with the Python oeuvre.

But I'm a musical theatre buff – something my companions are not – and I'm here to tell you that *Spamalot* is more than just a Monty Python tribute. It's a uproaring, borderline scathing, but ultimately loving commentary on musical theatre itself. The show cheerfully mocks its own genre, while remaining a classic – and classically satisfying – example of it. Neat trick! I guess you'd call it a meta-musical?

But I don't want to get down in the philosophical weeds with this review. While delightfully brainy, there's nothing serious about *Spamalot*. It's pure, unadulterated zaniness from beginning to end. Oh, sure, there are plenty of historical, political and cultural allusions – if you like that sort of thing in a musical – but I don't feel compelled to contemplate them. I'm too busy pondering why it is that fart jokes are so much funnier in a French accent. (Seriously, I've often thought Monty Python is just The Three Stooges for smart people.)

Perfectly Python... and a great musical, too!

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While I don't need big philosophical themes in my musicals, what I do need is big emotion – I need to feel! – and I was afraid *Spamalot* might not deliver in that department. As much as I enjoy sight gags, bathroom humor and slapstick silliness delivered with posh, British sophistication, I was afraid I'd miss the thrill and drama of the big emotional numbers. The Love Song. The Inspirational Song. Every great musical has them. I like how they make me feel – how my heart swells and my eyes well up. I like the catharsis.

Well, it's the darnedest thing. Apparently, a song's lyrics have nothing to do with that catharsis. It's purely physical. A certain combination of musical notes, delivered a certain way, sends a signal to my brain, causing chills to ascend up my vertebrae as my tear ducts are activated. I know this, now, because midway through the first act of *Spamalot* comes "The Song that Goes Like This," a spoof of the formulaic Broadway love song I am helpless to resist. The song explains – hilariously! – that it is required to show up at this juncture in the show, despite having no real reason for being there. It is sung with such panache – by voices so lovely – that I found myself tearing up and getting lumpy-throated, even as I grinned from ear to ear. (Incidentally, my face was literally sore from grinning by the end of this show.)

The simple truth, I think, is that I'm deeply moved by the work of great performers, even when they're just trying to make me laugh. And this cast is so good – every single member – it felt like a solemn privilege to watch them do their thing. (I'll bet nobody's ever used the word "solemn" in a *Spamalot* review before!)

Heading the cast are married (to each other) actors Steve Blanchard (King Arthur) and Meredith Inglesby (The Lady of the Lake). Both have serious resumes, including work on Broadway, and I can't imagine anybody owning these roles with more aplomb. Blanchard is dashing, handsome, and endearingly hapless as Arthur, while Inglesby, a Hilton Head native, is a funny, beautiful power house. Both are wonderful singers and the chemistry between them is palpable. What a pleasure to watch these seasoned performers at the top of their game!

The supporting cast is so exceptional I hesitate to mention anybody by name. But Jeffrey Watkins as "Dennis" Galahad deserves a shout-out, as do Michael DiLiberto as Sir Robin, Xander Chauncey as Lancelot, and Bill Bateman as the adorable Patsy. Already I feel guilty for naming names, because truly, there was nobody on that stage who wasn't bringing it, 100 percent. The ensemble is spectacular – full of singing, dancing, acting "triple threats" who had this mere mortal sitting there in awe, wondering: How do they *do* that?!

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The answer: With a lot of help from a great director. Island favorite Casey Colgan has returned to Hilton Head from NYC to do this show, and he's gathered quite a team. The sets by Terry Cermak – from a "very expensive" medieval forest to a Vegas-like Camelot – are brilliant. The costumes by Diana Griffin – from monks to knights to Laker Girls – are perfection. Broadway sensation Nic Thompson has supplied the rousing choreography – and apparently a lot of wigs! – and who knows how many other good theatre folk have dedicated themselves, heart and soul, to this production? From the looks of it, I'd say dozens. Maybe hundreds.

It occurs to me that I've given short shrift to the Pythonesque elements of the show, which are legion. Fans of Eric Idle and company will not be disappointed. The show is basically a take-off on *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, while one of the big production numbers – "Always Look on the Bright Side of Life" – is the iconic ditty from *Life of Brian*.

There are taunting Frenchmen, chopped off body parts, a homicidal rabbit and Knights of Nee a'plenty. In short, if you love Monty Python, you will love

Spamalot

. Yes, even if you don't love musicals. After all, it's a

spoof

of musicals! It makes

fun

of musicals! It downright

ridicules

musicals!

But watch out. It might just be the musical that makes you love musicals.

Spamalot runs through May 26th at the Arts Center of Coastal Carolina on Hilton Head. For more information visit www.artshii.com