

“The Sensuous Senator” Brings Naughty Political Romp to Sierra Madre Playhouse

By Fran Syverson

Tired of political rhetoric and politicians scandalous shenanigans? How about seeing a play where it's all in fun? Then you'll want to see “The Sensuous Senator” currently at the Sierra Madre Playhouse.

It has all the trappings of a “naughty political romp,” as it's billed. Red, white and blue bunting draped across the dais...the campaigners wearing glittery Old Glory flag pins in their lapels...all is ready. The moment is at hand to introduce the Senator and his wife, who is always at his side. And now: the speeches.

Senator Harry Douglas acknowledges his introductions, proclaims he will run for President, and then immodestly proceeds to list his many virtues, most notable of which are his commitment to family values, truth, fidelity, and on and on. Speeches! Applause! Probing questions from the press—most artfully dodged!

The accolades, the political platitudes in “The Sensuous Senator” are so stereotypical that we might think they were lifted from today's headlines and that we're at home watching TV!

But “doth the Senator protest too much”? We wonder—for soon the curtains open and we can peek into behind-the-scenes maneuvering that goes on in the Senator's townhouse.

Over coffee, talk turns to concern about questions posed by Betty Morrison of that pesky news magazine, “The Intruder.” Senator Douglas confers with two close Congressmen, his nephew Jack Maguire (Brendan Shanahan) and Clyde Salt (Charles Howerton.) The former is a relative newcomer to Congress and an innocent, the latter an old hand, cynical and a bit bruised by realities.

Soon Lois, the Senator's wife, must catch a flight to Chicago, so Salt and Maguire also leave.

And lo! The Senator's sensuous side emerges! “Aha! I'm alone for the weekend!” And he dials Veronica, his secretary. He's petulant when she tells her “honeybear” that she can't be with him, but Douglas soon goes to Plan B—and phones an agency for an “escort.”

Then, for the next hour and a half, the audience is treated to a riotous mélange of mishaps, as one by one, the people in his life arrive at the Senator's home, basically unannounced. Congressman Salt has locked himself out of his house. Maguire wants to strategize his uncle's campaign further. Gorgeous and frisky blonde Fiona arrives from ‘the agency.’ Scott Vinci as the plodding policeman keeps turning up to “check things out,” always at inopportune moments—as if there are any other moments during this wild evening! And voluptuous Veronica changes her mind and comes to enjoy time with her boss, also changing her clothes into something for evocative for the occasion. With Tanya C. Edwards effective as Morrison, the persistent news-snoop, it's more than a full house!

Of course it's a silly plot! It is, after all, as a bedroom farce. So buy into it, ignore the improbabilities, and laugh your way through the risqué and somewhat bawdy story that hinges on skimpy premises and even skimpier apparel!

“The Sensuous Senator,” written by Michael Parker, abounds with pantomimed humor and double-entendres. Laughs become better and better as the jokes build on previous set-ups.

Maguire's (Shanahan's) height plays to advantage in a couple of rollicking skits, and his wide-eyed innocence make him a perfect foil for Fiona's amorous advances, so well-depicted by Kerry Jade Aberman. Mark Tydell is a smooth operator, well up to the demands of playing the sensuous Senator with his befuddled quips and inventive alibis.

Activity in the bedroom gives new meaning to the phrase “undercover agency.” And Melanie Rashbaum spends a good deal of time *under* the bed as Veronica, impatiently awaiting her tryst.

The Senator's wife brings perhaps the only moments of seeming sanity in a story deep with illogical, evasive explanations of the goings-on. Lois Douglas's role is shared by Donna Cherry, who charmed us on opening night and will continue through the early portion of the run, and Jenifer Winkler, who will then portray Lois.

David Calhoun's split-screen stage with its two stairways and several doors allows people to be in either the bedroom or living room without running into each other, important for the rampant confusion. Helping Calhoun with set construction were Patt Paezynski, Brendan Shanahan, Karen Young, and Mike Dessin. Dessin also is stage manager and plays Marty Richmond.

Lois Tedrow brings her usual deft touch to the costuming, all the way from bumbling Clyde Salt's argyle sox and plaid bathrobe, to Veronica's and Fiona's clothes seemingly right out of Victoria's Secret.

Ken Salzman returns to the Playhouse as director, with Thelma Diaz assisting. Ward Calaway is producer; Barry Schwam, sound designer; and Steve Shaw, sound operator.

Maureen Davis handles the lighting, critical as the scenes shift from room to room. Elaina Present, Sierra Senzaki, and Karen Young are the lighting crew. Anne Marie Atwan is again in charge of properties.

Credit John Johnson and Calaway with program design. Donald Songster did the production photography, and Kate VanDevender created the poster art. Philip Sokoloff is publicist.

Childish squeals of laughter could be heard on opening night, for the fast-moving antics onstage were very funny. We might note, however, that even the title of "The Sensuous Senator" suggests it might not be considered exactly "family fare." If they're young enough, little ones won't "get" some of the adult jokes; for adolescents, it's another matter. Now you know.

But for adults, this "naughty political romp" as it's called on the program cover, is hilariously entertaining. Enjoy it at the Sierra Madre Playhouse weekends through Feb. 27. Curtain time is 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, and 2:30 p.m. for Sunday matinees. Admission is \$20 general, \$17 for seniors (65+) and students (13-17), and \$12 for children 12 and under.

The Sierra Madre Playhouse is located at 87 W. Sierra Madre Blvd., Sierra Madre. City lots offer free parking. Pre- or post-theater dining at local restaurants on Baldwin Avenue and Sierra Madre Boulevard can enhance your theater-going experience. For ticket reservations or more information, phone (626) 355-4318, or visit the website, www.sierramadreplayhouse.org, for online ticketing. For group reservations, call (626) 836-2125.