

Everybody on the Forum Theatre stage was singing "Hello, Dolly." But what they clearly were meaning was "Hello, Karla" - as in Wichita's own Broadway veteran Karla Burns - "It's so nice to have you back where you belong."

Five years after throat surgery that threatened to leave Burns without a speaking, much less a singing, voice, she is back doing iconic Broadway roles.

To be sure, the voice is a little different, a little less powerhouse, a little mellower. But Burns still has the power to move us and entertain us and, yes, to wow us with emotionally packed numbers like "Before the Parade Passes By" and the title tune ("Wow, wow, wow, fellas; look at the old girl now, fellas!").

The role of lovably meddlesome matchmaker Dolly Levi has been played by a host of Hollywood leading ladies, including Carol Channing in the 1964 Broadway original, Pearl Bailey in an award-winning black-cast version and Barbra Streisand in the frenetic 1969 movie version.

Here, Burns uses her comic chops as well as her singing to create a Dolly that's as wide-eyed and wacky as Channing and as mischievously seductive as Bailey while flashing her own thousand-watt smile to invite the audience into her little matchmaking games as she seeks to keep the top prize for herself.

Huron Breaux as Dolly's secret intended - the well-known half-a-millionaire Horace Vandergelder - is a hunkier version of the grumpy, crusty merchant than audiences are used to (like Walter Matthau). That casting provides an added reason of what Dolly sees in him as husband material.

Breaux also has a more melodious voice than most Vandergelders, giving a richer, more romantic sound to even comic numbers like "It Takes a Woman."

The same vocal quality is true for Stephen Hitchcock, who plays the almost slapstick role of Vandergelder's love-starved clerk, Cornelius. The character plays hooky from work one day to have an adventure and fall in love. Hitchcock still pulls out the pratfall stops, but his voice puts him in the leading man category rather than the comic relief.

Matching Hitchcock for the lovely duet "It Only Takes a Moment" is Megan Parsley as Irene, a hat shop owner whom Cornelius falls for the instant he spots her. Parsley's soprano has a delicate elegance that also makes her wistful "Ribbons Down My Back" a little gem.

Joining Cornelius and Irene for the wonderfully silly romp "Elegance" are their teenage assistants: Jordon Snow as Barnaby and Lindsay Sutton as Minnie Fay. Snow is appropriately gawky, and Sutton is hilariously perky, which are comic covers for their real purpose, which is bolstering a lot of the dance moves while the older couple sings.

The lively show is directed by Rick Bumgardner and spread into the audience, both through an extended stage built to the first row and characters charging up and down the center aisle. The two-story set by Bob Lancaster gives a sketchy storybook look with black-and-white drawings on roller shades rather than set pieces.

The only misstep for me was the odd choice of turning Dolly's comic rant, "So Long, Dearie," into a solo rather than letting her taunt Vandergelder to his face. It's treated more like Eliza Doolittle's "Without You" fantasy where she couldn't face Henry Higgins directly. But Dolly certainly has the gumption to confront Horace. It's not as satisfying when he's not there on stage to hear it.

The Victorian costumes by Kathryn Page-Hauptman are eye-popping and lavish, from Dolly's royal purple day dress to her fire-engine red evening gown to the black-and-white variations for chorus members that nod to Cecil Beaton's "Ascot" look from "My Fair Lady."

Choreography by Sarah Gale McQuery was rousing and lively, particularly for the famous dancing waiters in the “**Hello, Dolly**” number. The orchestra led by Tim Raymond initially was a little squawky until the strings and brass got warmed up, but Raymond’s own rinky-tink keyboard was a highlight.

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