

Monty Python's Spamalot' at The Little Theatre of Alexandria

By Yvonne French on August 3, 2014



The Little Theatre of Alexandria has a smash it on its hands with *The Monty Python's Spamalot*. The opening night audience bellowed and clapped and roared at the puns and gave a standing ovation at the end, when Ashlie-Amber Harris took her bows.



Center Front: Ashlie-Amber Harris (Lady of the Lake) and James Hotsko Jr.(King Arthur) and the cast of LTA's 'Monty Python's Spamalot.' Photo by Keith Waters for KX Photography.

Harris plays Lady of the Lake, who bestows the magical sword Excalibur on Arthur, thus making him king. In 2012 Harris made it all the way to Hollywood as a finalist in *American Idol*, and the former Colorado resident is now bringing her star power to Washington en route to what she hopes will be a career in New York. She turns in gospel-like arias on her solos, particularly "The Diva's Lament" in Act II, which could be called "The Diva's Lamé" for the full gold bodysuit she wears, but more on the stunning costumes later.

Compliments to the discernment of Director Wade Corder for bringing Harris to the local stage. Corder also perfectly cast James Hotsko Jr. as King Arthur. Hotsko, originally from Panama, is appropriately restrained as the obligatory straight man throughout the night, but the Virginia Tech graduate really lets loose in the Act II Finale.

Another highlight is when Harris and Hotsko lead the ensemble in a rousing "Find Your Grail" at the end of Act I. Both actors have a lot of musical credits to their names.

The show is a parody of the story of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, who go on a quest to find the Holy Grail, the cup that Christ drank from at the Last Supper. The Little Theatre of Alexandria's timing is perfect because both the grail and the Monty Python comedy troupe are having a resurgence, with historians claiming to have found the actual cup in Spain this past spring and audiences tuning in by the thousands last week for live-in-cinema screenings of *Monty Python Live (mostly)* by the surviving members, including *Spamalot* author Eric Idle, John Cleese, Michael Palin, Terry Jones, and Terry Gilliam as they closed a wildly popular reunion show in London.

Back in Alexandria, Arthur's footman, Patsy, is played hilariously by the talented and appealing Matt Liptak (who also plays the Mayor and Guard 2). Liptak famously clacks together two coconut shell halves to emulate the sounds of Arthur's horse's hoof beats.

This received applause the first time he did it from the expectant audience, whose members were clearly familiar with the movie *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975), also written by Idle. The musical is billed as “A new musical lovingly ripped off from the motion picture.” Idle, who played Sir Robin and six other roles in the movie, incorporates the most scenarios into the musical, including an interchange with a mustachioed French Taunter and a popular sword fight in which the victim downplays his wounds even as they grow more numerous and dire.

This retelling is as funny as the movie and well worth the price of admission to see live actors singing and dancing right in front of you to live music by a professional orchestra. The good times are truly infectious.

Playing Sir Lancelot and the French Taunter (and Knight of Ni and Tim the Enchanter [on stilts, no less!]) is Patrick McMahan, whose body language exudes humor and whose comedic timing is perfect. One can tell he is having fun in his roles and he is a lot of fun to watch.

Dimitri Gann plays a gallant Sir Robin and also turns in a fine performance as the cleric Brother Maynard and Guard 1; Peter Halverson plays ponderous Sir Dennis Galahad as well as the dismembered Black Knight and Prince Herbert's Father; and Todd Paul plays an eminently convincing Dennis's Mother as well as Sir Bedevere and Concord.

Corder and Choreographer Grace Machanic get kudos for bringing out flourishes in each of the actors' performances, whether narrating (Patrick Graham, who also plays Not Dead Fred, Prince Herbert, and a Dancing Nun), tap dancing, miming, or cabaret. The multi-talented and hard working Ensemble is composed of (additional roles in parentheses) Stephanie Gaia Chu (Laker Girl, Minstrel), Carla Crawford (Laker Girl), Graham Dickerson, Katie Doyle (Laker Girl), Christy Fischer (Laker Girl), Michael Gale, Drew Holcombe, Derek Marsh (Sir Not Appearing, Dancing Monk, Minstrel), Molly Spooner (Laker Girl), Matt Stover (Sir Bors, French Guard, Minstrel), Griffin Voltmann (French Guard) and Sarah Weinhardt (Laker Girl/Dance Captain).



Dimitri Gann as Sir Robin with the Ensemble of “You Won’t Succeed on Broadway.” Photo by Keith Waters for Kx Photography.

King Arthur (James Hotsko Jr.) and the Lady of the Lake (Ashlie-Amber Harris), and the Laker Girls dance well in Act I’s “Come With Me,” only to be matched by Sir Robin (Dimitri Gann) and the Ensemble in Act II’s “You Won’t Succeed on Broadway,” which spoofs the hat dance in *Fiddler on the Roof*. *Spamalot* is in part a send-up of Broadway shows and was itself nominated for 14 Tonys and won three, including Best Musical, in 2005.

The 14-piece orchestra under the baton of Paul Nasto played music by John Du Prez and Idle that ranged from fanfares to salsa and back with ultra-smooth transitions. My only wish is that the music and some of the singing was just a little bit louder.

The excellent costumes designed by Grant Kevin Lane include yards of dyed linen for the knights and their retainers, some with finely rendered hand painting, augmented by artificially aged knitted and crocheted elements, a ferocious fur mantle and some amazing guard's uniforms in Act II. Along with outstanding hats, wigs, boots, gloves, hauberks, headgear, light-up bouquets and lots of brightly colored leotards, there must be more than 400 costume elements altogether.

Lane also designed the set. Most of the action took place in front of a simply drawn and carefully painted castle. The Trojan rabbit is the pièce de résistance and you can tell how much fun 10-person set crew had with this comedy at its peak of silliness. More than 100 volunteers worked on the show beginning in January 2013.

Taken together, props (Helen Bard-Sobola and Rebecca Sheehy) and lights and video/graphics (Franklin C. Coleman and Austin Fodrie, respectively) gave the musical a feeling of the Monty Python television show because they interspersed live action with flat decorative elements like the kind that Trader Joe's uses on its advertising circulars and grocery bags. Pieces included a pointing hand of God and a chandelier topped playfully with a cat mask. Huge video projections on a scrim worked seamlessly and included a portcullis and the feet of God with moving clouds.



James Hotsko Jr. as King Arthur with the Knights of the Round Table. Photo by Keith Waters for KX Photography.

The homespun setting and props made the show unpretentious, as if to underscore the, "Let's not take this too seriously" theme implicit in the script. With this as the backdrop for Harris and the rest of the talented cast, The Little Theatre of Alexandria's hilarious production of *Monty Python's Spamalot* is pitch perfect! Huzzah!