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## When it comes to music, 'Gypsy' breaks the rules

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I've written before in this space about the crucial importance of live music to the musical-theater advertisement experience. Nothing is more disappointing than a show played to tape — such as the recent production of "End of the Rainbow" at the Milwaukee Repertory Theater, or most of Emerald City Theatre Company's shows at the Broadway Playhouse. (I always argue live music actually is *more* important in kids' shows.) Whatever the material, nothing is more disheartening than to peer down into an orchestra pit at one of Chicago's beautiful downtown theaters and find a clutch of synthesizers and a half-eaten sandwich — which has been the case all too often when one of the lower grade tours has come through town. To really make your heart sink, you just have to have the memory of a previous version of that very same tour with live players sitting where empty space now resides. That's enough to make the blood boil, especially when there has been no reduction in ticket prices.

The buzz surrounding the Paramount Theatre in Aurora has come, to no small degree, from that theater's commitment to full orchestrations, in contrast to the other suburban musical houses with which it competes. And here in Chicago — home of the Chicago Federation of Musicians — we're blessed with uncommonly experienced and fine players, a truth understood by countless Broadway composers and musical directors over the years as they've tried out their productions in this city. There is a reason pit orchestras in this city sound so darn good. I've heard as much from everyone from Andrew Lipa to Mel Brooks.

Musicians of that grade do not, of course, work for free. And so producers and producing entities — sometimes to raise profits but more often just to get a show up within budget — often try their best to cut down their numbers. Since showfolk tend to be masters of spin, they rarely come out and say that, of course. Usually, the likes of me are fed some line about their wishing to emulate a particular sound or style or some other such nonsense. Once you arrive at the theater, it usually takes about two minutes of the overture to miss all the players who aren't there.

So when director Gary Griffin, in a pre-show interview for "Gypsy," took that tack, I was cynical, albeit quietly. Griffin, who is a very charming fellow, argued that a full-sized orchestration not only is too much for the Chicago Shakespeare Theater space (maybe) but is a mismatch with the vaudeville style of most of the musical numbers in the piece. That's true to some extent. The show-within-a-show numbers, such as "Let Me Entertain You," would not have had a full, Broadway-sized orchestra behind them and you could argue such a style should carry over. But then "Gypsy" also has musical numbers that are not in any kind of performance setting, and thus that logic doesn't apply. In fact, a couple of its major numbers are both performance pieces *and* specifically fantastical: "All You Need Is the Girl" and "Rose's Turn." That's one of many reasons this particular Jule Styne score is an incomparable piece of work.

Many is the time I've heard Tulsa sing the line "and then the strings come in" as he fantasizes about his future on the stage, only for no strings whatsoever to follow him. Poor Tulsa, one usually thinks. Even his dreams are cheap.

Well. In this instance, my cynicism was misplaced. The 14-piece orchestra at "Gypsy" sounds remarkable. Ever since I saw Griffin's production — which is not to be missed for many reasons — I've been pondering why. It's partly to do with superb sound reinforcement. It's partly the success of the orchestra's location within the design. But it's mostly the work of musical director Rick Fox, who adjusted (if that's the word) the original orchestration.

I'm not poring over that score as I write, but I believe "Gypsy" was written originally for 28 pieces. So Fox, whose work at the Canada's Stratford Festival is highly respected, eliminated half. He got rid of the obvious stuff — poor Tulsa's strings and so on. But he also *added* instruments, such as a tuba and banjo, that fortify that vaudeville concept and add brilliance. He's not credited for orchestrations in the program, but this is a "Gypsy" that sounds quite different from the usual. No question.

Thanks to Fox, and those fine union musicians in Chicago, you get one of the greatest musicals in history *and* a sound that jolts and delights. And I bet it didn't even break the bank.

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