

ARTS | RAHWAY

# A Romantic Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man

At Hamilton Stage, a musical about James Joyce's life and love affair with Nora Barnacle.

GIVEN THAT JAMES JOYCE was a leading avant-garde author of his day, it is a tad paradoxical that "Himself and Nora," written and composed by Jonathan Brielle, has been devised as a conventional musical theater piece. Still, the intimate chamber musical, at the 199-seat Hamilton Stage in Rahway, is a lively, sometimes lusty, spin through the love life, troubles and literary times of

## THEATER REVIEW

MICHAEL SOMMERS

the great Irish writer.

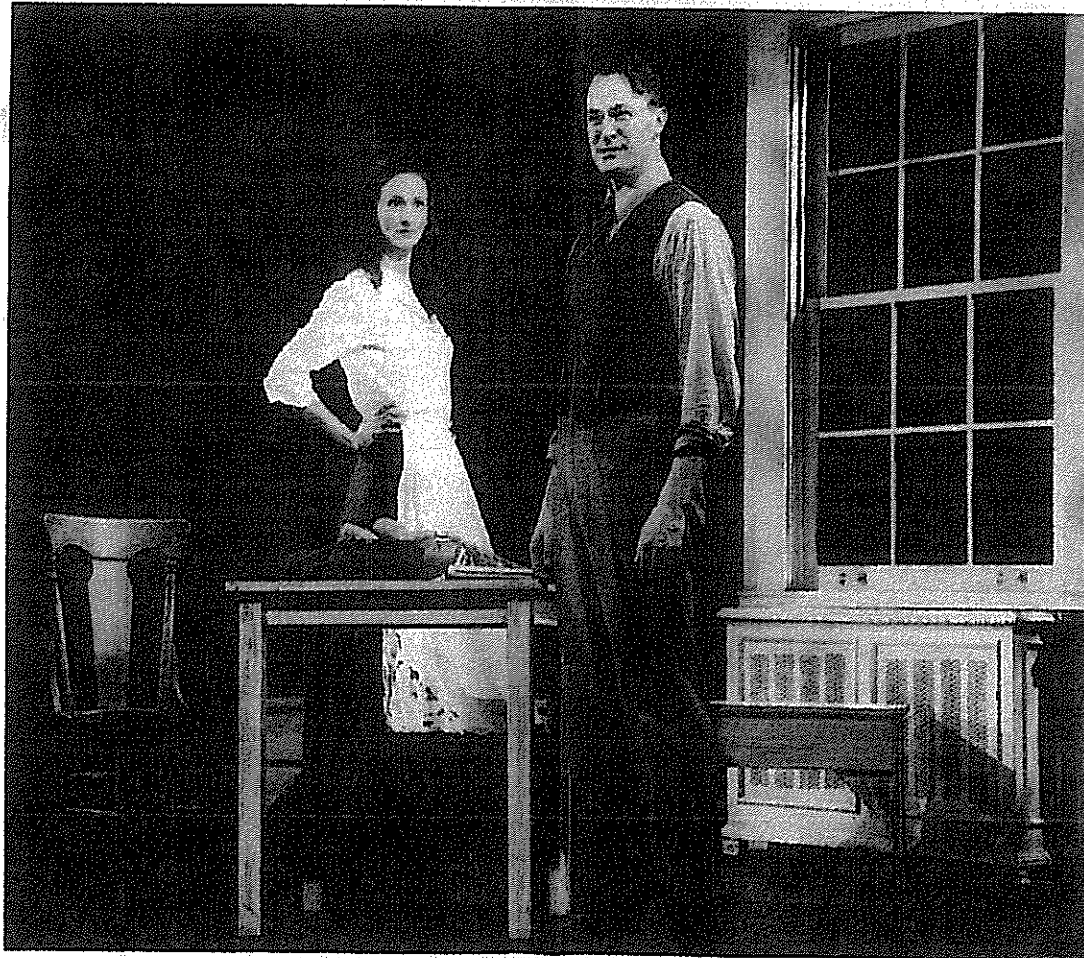
Performed by an appealing five-member company, the show is handsomely produced by the American Theater Group.

The two-act musical was first staged in 2005 at the Old Globe Theater in San Diego, then revised for the New York Musical Theater Festival in 2012, with most of the same creative team and cast that it now has in Rahway. The show is in smooth shape and moves through its paces swiftly and confidently.

The musical starts with Joyce's unexpected death in 1941, then flashes back to Dublin in the early 1900s, a sorrowful time in his youth, with his dying mother and blustering father. Joyce's gloom is dispelled by the advent of Nora Barnacle, a vibrant, plain-spoken chambermaid who becomes the love of his life and an inspiration for his work.

Three songs that arrive early in the show — the assertive "I Tell You Now," the sensual "Kiss" and the reckless "Compatriots in Lust" — establish the couple's passionate relationship.

Because of Joyce's rebellious attitude toward the Catholic church, he and Nora are not wed until 1931. In the years before, they bring up two rather unhappy children while sharing a threadbare existence in Europe. Their economic plight is eventual-



CHRISTINA L. WILSON

ly mitigated by well-to-do sponsors and the publication of major works like "Ulysses."

Joyce's heavy drinking, chronic vision problems and egotistic ways strain his relationship with Nora, but she proves a tenacious soul; her theme song in the musical is the anthem "Stand Fast."

Literary figures of the 1920s like Ezra Pound and Sylvia Beach pop up fleetingly, while the scowling specter of a priest who

disapproves of Joyce's writing and behavior is more prevalent.

Less a lyrical study of an artist's life than a robust romantic musical, "Himself and Nora" skims through the biographical details to leave ample room for the couple's love story.

The enjoyable score by Mr. Brielle, a veteran composer who lives in Hunterdon County, meshes neatly with his libretto and

Matt Bogart plays James Joyce and Jessica Burrows is Nora Barnacle in the two-act musical "Himself and Nora."

A lively, sometimes lusty, picture of a driven Irish writer and his earthy, tenacious wife.

embraces a rhythmic variety of ardent, melodic songs that are often affirmative in spirit and occasionally colored musically by Joyce's Irish heritage. The lyrics are intermittently bawdy in reflection of Joyce's uninhibited way with words. A musical quintet does well by the score, which has been partly orchestrated with woodwinds to foster a sometimes keening, sometimes lilting Gaelic flavor.

Resembling a very handsome Joyce, Matt Bogart (lately of "Jersey Boys" on Broadway) gives a vigorous, strongly sung impression of a driven man. A glowing Jessica Burrows portrays the earthy Nora with plucky spirits and a warm voice. Mr. Bogart and Ms. Burrows make a personable couple whose intimate body language is as expressive as their duets.

David Arthur, Cole Burden and Lianne Marie Dobbs, who together play nearly a dozen characters, adeptly create distinctive individuals. The attractive period clothes designed by Sara Jean Tosetti augment the actors' characterizations.

Michael V. Moore's minimal setting and Cat Tate Starmer's lighting enable the show's easy scene-to-scene flow. There are some obtrusive sound effects of wind meant to signify the passing of time and souls; otherwise, the artful simplicity of the production, directed by Michael Bush and featuring spirited choreography by Kelli Barclay, enhances the trim little musical.

"Himself and Nora," by Jonathan Brielle, is at the Hamilton Stage, 360 Hamilton Street, Rahway, through May 12. Information: (732) 499-8226 or ucpac.org.

ARTS | RAHWAY

# 'A Bubble Around My Heart'

In a new musical, a teenager in poor health travels across the country in pursuit of his love.

YOU'LL FORGET many of the songs the moment you leave "Bubble Boy," a musical being given its world premiere by the American Theater Group in Rahway. Still, when you look back on this likable and lightweight show, you'll probably remember the good time you had when you first heard them.

## THEATER REVIEW

KEN JAWOROWSKI

In this comedy, based on the 2001 movie of the same name (which was in turn inspired by the 1976 TV drama "The Boy in the Plastic Bubble"), Jimmy Livingston, a young man born with an impaired immune system, lives inside a hermetically sealed room — it is thought that any exposure to germs will kill him.

He is tender to by his rabidly overprotective mother and his tight-lipped father, and resigned to a lonely existence until he meets Chloe, a young woman who has moved in next door and starts to visit him.

It's no surprise that these two teenagers fall in love, and after Chloe has a change of heart, leaving their California town for Niagara. Falls to marry someone else. Jimmy decides to "build a bubble suit/To keep me safe from germs en route," and he embarks on a cross-country trip to win her back. "I can't let Chloe marry that brute/I'm out of here."

The resulting journey, which makes up the second act of "Bubble Boy," holds the cleverest scenes of this two-hour show. Unlike Act I, set almost entirely inside the Livingstons' home, the outdoor trek throws Jimmy together with an assortment of others, most of them misfits: a quirky bandit and an ice cream truck driver with troubles of his own.

**The hero risks his life because he 'can't let Chloe marry that brute.'**

Using those added characters, the book writers — Cinco Paul and Ken Daurio, who together also wrote the screenplay for the 2001 film, as well as for the "Despicable Me" movies — build funnier situations the farther Jimmy travels. The rare (and welcome) caustic moments, particularly those at a bus station ticket booth, come off as especially droll when contrasted with the warmhearted and chipper outlook that is established in the opening scenes.

The music and lyrics, by Mr. Paul, also gain momentum in the second half. After leading up to the inevitable road trip with a few too many light-pop, sound-alike tunes, Mr. Paul's wordplay turns more mischievous, as in the charmingly silly "There's a Bubble Around My Heart," in which the characters expound on their various fears: "There's a bubble around my heart/Not a real one, 'cause then I'd be dead/But a metaphorical one instead."

Chris McCarrell, as Jimmy, is an easy-going actor with a cheery presence. Early on, when confined to a small space on the stage, he is skilled in using his expressions to generate extra laughs.

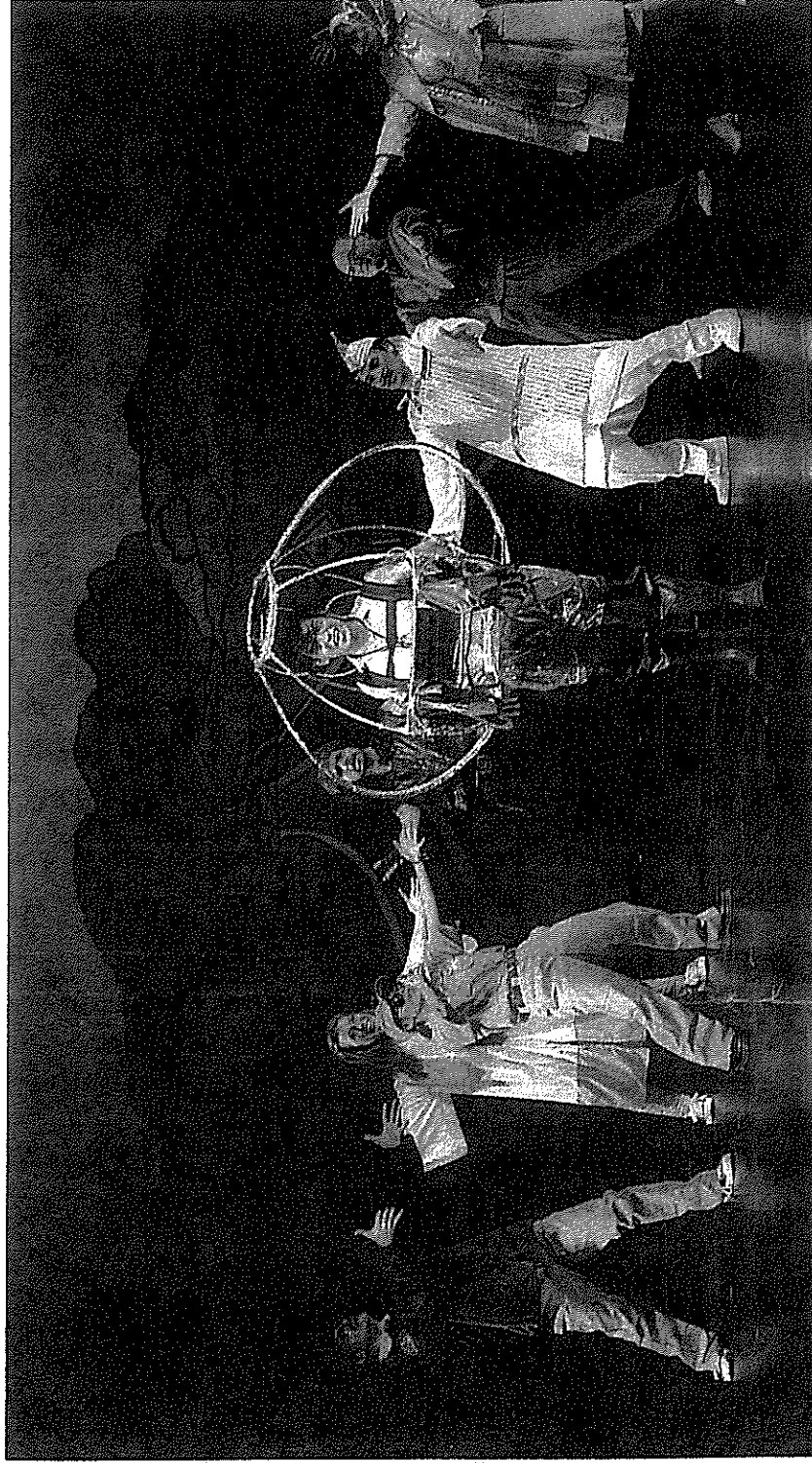
† Gerianne Pérez, as Chloe, is not as adept, though she is an impressive singer,

seemingly effortless.

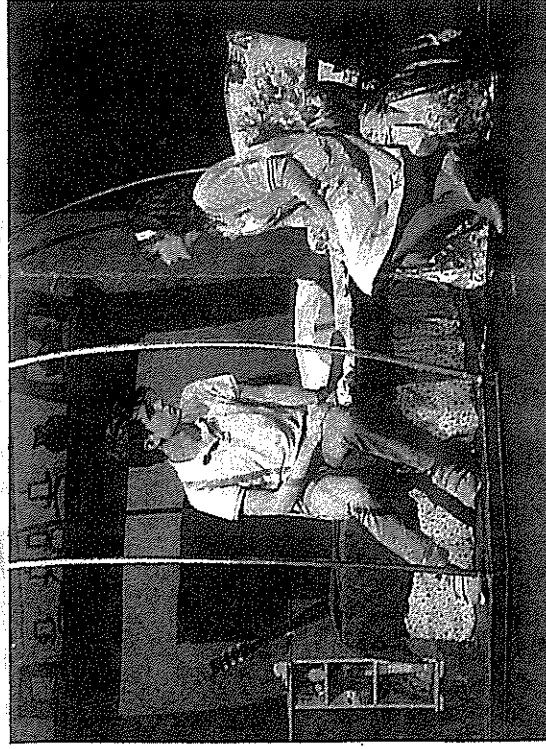
Erin Maguire and Benjamin Hoves, as Jimmy's parents, employ keen comic timing, while Gabriel Sloyer (who was a standout in "Pinkolandia" at New York's Intar Theater earlier this year) and Alex Grace Paul shine in various ensemble roles. Rachid Sabitri, Marrick Smith, Anita Welch and Alex Chester complete the cast of 10, directed by Jen Wineman at Hamilton Stage for the Performing Arts.

The five-piece orchestra, conducted by Brent Crayon, is smooth and supportive of the singers, though at a recent performance Jessica Paz's sound design experienced occasional dropouts and several over-mixed segments that one hopes have been remedied.

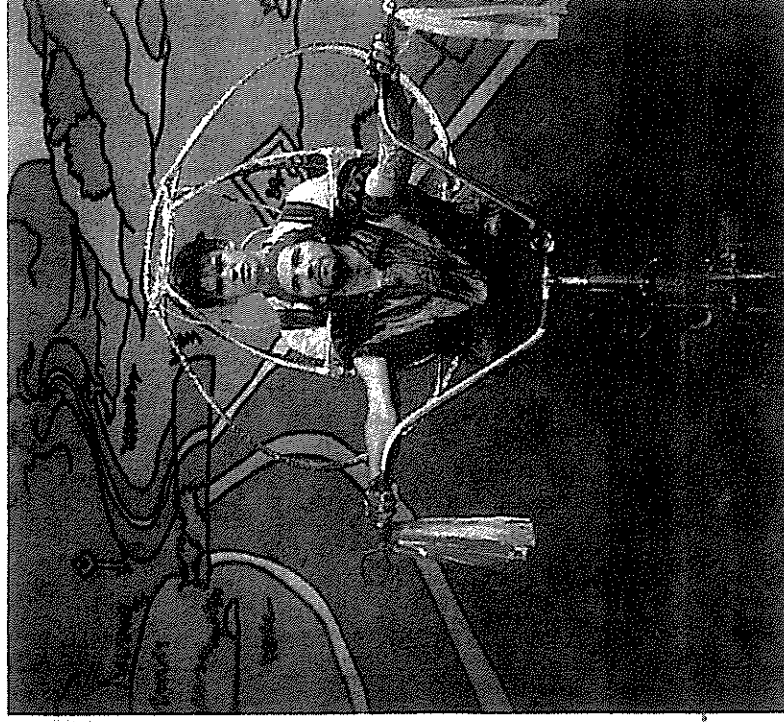
"Bubble Boy" wraps up as anticipated,



PHOTOGRAPH



Top, Chris McCarrell as Jimmy, center, with the ensemble. Mr. McCarrell with Erin Maguire as Jimmy's mother, above, and with Gabriel Sloyer in one of his roles as Slim, a member of a biker gang, at right.



with a sweet ending that is entirely in line with the rest of its good-natured story. With such a nice conclusion, it seems churlish to speculate how the script might have been even sharper: had the writers risked subverting a few of the audience's expectations, or further varied the show's consistently sunny tone.

Such chances are hard to take, of course.

As it is, this new musical is quite a bit of fun. And that either.

"Bubble Boy," by Cinco Paul, runs through Nov. 24 at Hamilton Performing Arts, 360 Hamill (732) 499-8226; ucpac.org