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Published 0:01 AM PST Thursday, Aug. 17, 2006

Theater review: 'Funny': It's the real thing

By [Marcus Crowder](#) -- Bee Theater Critic

James Brennan is the slave Pseudolus, Melanie Haller the courtesan Tintinabula.

Charr Crail • [See additional images](#)

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It's a given that "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum" generates laughs. The show is a well-oiled comic machine that rarely disappoints. Even if it's a rare production that is as happily inventive and continually hysterical as the one that opened Tuesday night at the Music Circus' Wells Fargo Pavilion.

From the wing-ding, table-setting opening of "Comedy Tonight" to its surprise at the end of the full, satisfying evening, the inclusive ensemble gave this classic farce a masterful showing.

Director Marcia Milgrom Dodge makes expansive use of the two multi-talented funnymen at her disposal -- James Brennan and John Scherer. And why not? As the Roman slaves Pseudolus and Hysterium at the heart of the play's convoluted contrivances, Brennan and Scherer share an undeniable sense of fun and good will.

It doesn't hurt that both men excel at numerous aspects of performance. Brennan is a fabulous dancer, and his stage movement results in a performance clinic. Scherer is an exceptional singer and malleable comedian. With Brennan as the perpetually scheming Pseudolus seeking his freedom, and Scherer as the always-nervous Hysterium ("I live to grovel"), the production is pitched for high-level antics. Brennan in particular was so

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assured and in command that he ad-libbed to the crowd's responses and even needed to take time to re-set himself when the comic business broke him out of character.

The book by Burt Shevelove and Larry Gelbart, with songs by Stephen Sondheim, concerns three neighboring houses in ancient Rome.

Pseudolus and Hysterium are slaves in the home of Senex (Walter Hudson), his wife, Domina (Jessica Sheridan), and their son, Hero (Ryan Driscoll). Hero is infatuated with Philia (Ashleigh Davidson), a beautiful young woman from next door. Philia lives in a house of courtesans owned by Marcus Lycus (Ron Wisniski) and has been sold to the soldier Miles Gloriosus (Christopher Carl). For the price of his freedom, Pseudulos says he will get Philia for Hero. The third house belongs to the elderly sea captain Erronius (Jim Lane), who is searching for his long-lost children.

Nimbly playing numerous supporting characters are the versatile Proteans -- Venny Carranza, Brant Michaels and Peyton Royal.

Everything works, but highlights include the parade of fabulous courtesans during the "House of Marcus Lycus" number, and the quartet performance of "Everybody Ought To Have a Maid," which gets funnier with each character added to the song.

Director Dodge and choreographer D.J. Salisbury create a giddy and exhausting pace that the performers somehow maintain. An added kick is several sly references to shows throughout this year's Music Circus season.

WHAT: Music Circus production

WHEN: Continues at 2 and 8 p.m. today and Saturday, 8 p.m. Friday and 7:30 p.m. Sunday

WHERE: Wells Fargo Pavilion, 1419 H St.

TIME: 2 hours and 30 minutes, including one intermission

TICKETS: \$37-\$49

INFORMATION: (916) 557-1999 or www.californiamusicaltheatre.com

4 stars

ABOUT THE WRITER:

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John Scherer, who plays the slave Hysterium, uses his singing and comedic chops to complement James Brennan's funny slave Pseudolus in the Music Circus production.

Charr Crail

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belladivince at 8:01 AM PST Thursday, August 17, 2006 wrote:

Run, don't walk to the Box Office and get a ticket for this show!!! I saw it on Tuesday and wiped t...[more](#)

finpacguy at 11:21 AM PST Thursday, August 17, 2006 wrote:

The best show of the season hands down.....a thorough delight!!!!!!...[more](#)

hwallace916 at 3:03 PM PST Friday, August 18, 2006 wrote:

I have never laughed so hard at the theatre! Brennan and Scherer earned every minute of their stand...[more](#)

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