



Edited by  
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**P'S IN A POD**  
Pasek, left,  
and Paul work  
in harmony.

## Changes of Heart



**Remy Bumpo Theatre Company** (see Resident companies). By Pierre de Marivaux. Dir. Timothy Douglas. With Alana Arenas, Nicolas Gamboa, Linda Gillum, Steve Wojtas. 2hrs 45mins; two intermissions.

Remy Bumpo recasts Marivaux's 1723 commedia in 1960s Chicago. The Prince's court is on the North Shore, and country rubes Silvia (Alana Arenas) and Harlequin (Nicolas Gamboa) are native South Siders. So we're told in the program, anyway. Timothy Douglas's concept may well be a useful lens for understanding the class distinctions of Marivaux's pre-Revolution France. But aside from a kicky '60s soundtrack, that concept doesn't really show up onstage; anyone who hasn't read that this was meant to be Chicago wouldn't have a clue. Douglas's program notes tell us what his production doesn't show.

That said, this is a mostly well-acted rendition of Marivaux's complex comedy of love's inconstancies, here in Stephen Wadsworth's 1994 translation-adaptation. The Prince (an amusingly grave Steve Wojtas), smitten with commoner Silvia, abducts her to his court, intent on making her return his affections, but Silvia pines for her hot-blooded hometown love Harlequin. Gamboa's buffoon is the hardest element to swallow when it comes to the "Chicago" setting; the actor plays Harlequin in the broadest of strokes and with a thick accent that makes him sound like a Sofia Vergara impersonator. He feels out of place among the more grounded farceurs in the cast. Arenas is achingly honest as usual, and Linda Gillum hits the right notes as a manipulative courtier. Douglas's production has its fair share of charm, but sluggish pacing tends to drain the comedy of its sparkle.

—Kris Vire



**HARLEQUIN, NO ROMANCE** Gamboa, right, throws a fit.

PHOTOS: LEFT, COURTESY OF THE SILVERMAN GROUP; RIGHT, JOHNNY KNIGHT

## Team players

Songwriting pair Benj Pasek and Justin Paul write their own *Story*. By **Kris Vire**

Before there was "Pasek and Paul," the up-and-coming New York-based musical-theater songwriting team, there were Benj Pasek and Justin Paul, University of Michigan students with musical aspirations of a different sort.

The two friends met when they were placed in the same freshman-orientation group. "I fancied myself a freestyle rapper at the time, and Justin thought that he was an amazing beat-boxer," Pasek says archly in a basement rehearsal room beneath the Oriental Theatre, Paul laughing silently by his side. "And so our first collaboration was me thinking that I could rap and him trying to accompany me doing so."

Pasek, a suburban Philadelphia native, and Paul, who grew up in Westport, Connecticut, soon abandoned that dream. "But we do the next closest thing, which is musical theater," Paul says with a grin.

The two found their groove when, dissatisfied with their tiny roles in a UMich production of *City of Angels*—"I was the, um, Man with Camera," Pasek says; "my mom flew out to Ann Arbor to see me take a photo onstage"—they decided to give themselves better material.

They wrote the coming-of-age song cycle *Edges* in 2005, when both were 19; it's now licensed by Music Theater

International and has had productions around the world. In 2007, months after graduating, the pair became the youngest winners of the American Theatre Wing's Jonathan Larson Grant.

This week Pasek and Paul's work can be seen in Chicago for the first time in *A Christmas Story, The Musical*, an adaptation of the iconic 1983 film. The show's producers hired the duo to write the score for a 2010 developmental production at Seattle's 5th Avenue Theatre; they've continued to refine the work during a five-city holiday tour culminating at the Chicago Theatre.

Working with book writer Joseph Robinette, Pasek and Paul found ways to musicalize some of the film's best-known sequences. Ralphie's cowboy daydream becomes the Western-tinged fantasy sequence "Ralphie to the Rescue"; his Old Man's coveted prize is turned into a full-on leg-lamp kick line in "A Major Award."

"There are sort of those iconic moments in the movie where it says to me, this has gotta be a song," Pasek says. "It's also important to know what not to mess with," Paul adds. "The ones that are so iconic to the movie,

how do you not mess those memories up for people?"

Accolades continue to build for the team. Last year Goodspeed Opera House staged Pasek and Paul's adaptation of Roald Dahl's *James and the Giant Peach*, featuring choreography by noted dance troupe Pilobolus. In February, they received the Richard Rodgers Award for Musical Theater for *Dogfight*, an adaptation of the River Phoenix-Lili Taylor film that was commissioned by Lincoln Center and will premiere next year. Also in February, they attended the Sundance Institute Playwrights' Retreat; in October, they received the ASCAP Songwriter's Fellowship Award.

"I knew of their work," says director John Rando, the *Urinetown* Tony winner, citing Pasek and Paul's reputation as a reason he signed on to

*A Christmas Story* following the Seattle run. "I knew they were sort of really exciting, young, emerging Broadway talent."

Pasek and Paul no doubt will see their work on Broadway soon. For now, they're enjoying this moment. "The Chicago Theatre is, I think, double the size of any Broadway house," Pasek says, no small amount of wonder on his face. "It'll definitely be the biggest venue that anything we've ever written will ever probably be at."

*A Christmas Story* runs *Wednesday 14–December 30*. See *Touring shows*.