

# Call it Burns Park's 'Damn Yankees'

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## REVIEW

The Burns Park Players revival of "Damn Yankees" is a near-wonderful show, when you consider it's hobbled by hazards inherent in staging a show involving a lot of kids.

The result is a cast-of-150 Burns Park epic that's terrific treat for families, if less so for somebody expecting the everything-the-traffic-will-allow ways of Broadway.

This scarcely-dated 1955 musical finds middle-aged baseball fan Joe Boyd (played by Glenn Perry) willing to sell his soul to the devil for a chance—in the body of young superstar Joe Hardy (Jon Wardner) — to lead his bedraggled, beloved Washington Senators to the American League pennant. And beat those damn Yankees in the process.

The ballpark stuff is brilliant, including a wholly original opening: Multitudes of kids fill the stage singing "Take Me Out to the Ball Game." The audience stands while a celebrity singer (Janet Taylor) offers the most over-articulated rendition of the National Anthem this side of Jose Feliciano. The pre-game hoopla veers into the game itself — in which Senator fielders converge on a pop fly, collide in unison and go sprawling as the ball drops harmlessly. Damn Yanks win again!

Things never lose steam, as Clinch Steward creating a Mr. Applegate (i.e. the devil) worthy of Jim Carrey. Jon Elliott belts out "You Gotta Have Heart," heading a fabulous singer-dancer ballplayer ensemble, while Kathy Koehler breaks hearts as Joe's deserted spouse. Meg. Ariel Hurwitz's choreography (with one big exception) is sprightly and funny, especially the ballplayer antics she conjures forth.

Set designer Mark Tucker has juiced up the stage with old-fashioned ballpark advertisements, including an original Joe Hardy endorsement, "Shoeless Joe brushes with Chlor-O-Dent." Tucker has created a satanic lair done up in a black/red/pink motif resembling a bad-taste Vegas hotel suite, complete with junior devils running around with pitchforks. Director Mike Mosallam has obviously done his baseball homework, engraving the right year on a championship trophy: 1924, the last time the Senators ever won a World Series.

But then there's the Lola problem. As Applegate's slinky temptress, Diana Simonte might be a knockout if only choreographer Hurwitz — or perhaps some Burns Park higher-ups — would have let her. Simonte simply *stands there* while offering up Lola's slinky character-defining song, "A Little

Brains — a little Talent." Later on Simonte wiggles her posterior a bit during Lola's famous locker-room seduction of Joe ("Whatever Lola Wants"), yet keeps her body English to a minimum while shedding scarcely a thread of clothing — not even a transparent red skirt that begs to be torn off.

Lola's de-fanging dilutes her later conversion to a good girl: She's three-quarters there already. That's a big problem, given that she's one of the show's three major figures (four, if you count Meg), and her satanic work has been undercut. Joe Hardy is still himself, but Wardner — so good as Billy Bigelow in last year's "Carousel" — gives a strangely uninvolved, unathletic performance.

Happily, "Damn Yankees" survives its anti-Lola prudery and Joe's fecklessness thanks to traditional Burns Park gung-ho teamwork. It's embodied by Nancy Bryk and Jane Glass as Meg's neighbors and ultimate baseball groupies. These feisty folks would make any good show great, and there's lots more able folks — plus kids galore behaving as if baseball were still the National Game — backing them up. Play ball!

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"Damn Yankees" runs Friday and Saturday, Feb. 16 and 17 at Tappan Middle School, 2251 E. Stadium Blvd. Curtain is 7:30 p.m. For details call (734) 994-3508.