

## On stage: IWU's 'Sunday in the Park with George' brings art to life

MARCIA WEISS For The Pantagraph

Nov 16, 2022

**M**y recommendation concerning the production of “Sunday in the Park With George,” currently running at Illinois Wesleyan University, is simply this: Go see it. If you love exquisitely produced musicals: Go see it. If you adore the brilliant Stephen Sondheim: Go see it. If you want to shell out peanuts to see a professional-level show that you could pay hundreds of dollars to see on the stages of New York or Chicago, you guessed it: Get your tickets now.

One of the many advantages of living in Bloomington-Normal is that we are blessed with so many institutions of higher learning. And with those resources on tap at the universities comes the unique opportunity to see plays that aren’t often produced. As for myself, I have always yearned to see a live production of “Sunday in the Park With George,” but just never had the chance.

Director Scott Susong has masterfully orchestrated a seamless production of this challenging musical. This is a show about a painting, “A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte” by George Seurat (which, by the way, can be seen at The Art Institute of Chicago).

How the French masterpiece, painted in 1886, was created, who are the people depicted in it, and what is the life of the painting after the painter has long left this earth are explored in this most “out-of-the-box” musical of musicals. James Lapine, who wrote the book for “George,” has divined out of thin air a back story for all of the people who populate the painting.

The first person the audience meets is Dot, who is modeling for George. She is furious at him, as she tries to concentrate and stand still, and he keeps barking orders at her. “Why is it you always sit in the shade, while I’m out in the sun,” she complains, but to no avail. George is single-minded about his work and won’t even acknowledge that she is uncomfortable.

George appears not to care when Dot informs him that she is carrying his child. She decides to marry Louis the Baker upon the sage advice of George's own mother, beautifully played by Claire Flynn, who says, "You cannot eat your painting, my dear, not when there's bread in the oven." Ever the realist, Dot marries Louis, gives birth to Marie and moves to America.

The second act moves to the future in 1984, and we see George and Dot's great-grandson as he tries to strike out on his own as an artist at a gallery event. Gone are the bustles, top hats and parasols of the 1880s, as gorgeously costumed by Harri Horsley. Her contemporary designs are no less imaginative and fun.

With the vocal direction of Wendy Marck and the musical direction of Charles Berggren, the combination of a live orchestra and well-trained vocalists, the result is nothing short of stunning. Everyone is on their A game here.

Maura Pawelko plays Dot and Will Dusek plays George. How these two college students have the savvy, the discipline and the maturity to tackle these vocally and emotionally daunting roles is truly a sight to behold. Don't miss this gem in your own backyard.

## **IF YOU GO**

**What:** "Sunday in the Park with George," book by James Lapine, music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim

**Where:** Jerome Mirza Theatre at McPherson Hall, Illinois Wesleyan University

**When:** Nov. 16, 17, 18 and 19 at 7:30 p.m., and Nov. 20 at 2 p.m.

**Cost:** \$5 to \$14; call 309-556-3232 or go to [iwu.edu/theatre/season/](http://iwu.edu/theatre/season/)

**Running time:** 2 hours and 40 minutes, including a 15-minute intermission