



## World Premiere Musical DON'T HUG ME, WE'RE MARRIED Incites Roars of Laughter!

Reviewed by Shari Barrett on 10-24-14

The Group Rep is currently presenting the world premiere musical comedy DON'T HUG ME, WE'RE MARRIED with book and lyrics by Phil Olson, music by Paul Olson, directed by Doug Engalla, choreography by Stan Mazin, and produced by Laura Coker for the Group Rep. The fifth in the popular Don't Hug Me series of musicals is set for a limited run, October 3rd through November 15th, at the Lonny Chapman Theatre in the NoHo Theatre and Arts District - North Hollywood, CA.

It has oft been said that writers should write about what they know. That philosophy brought brothers Phil and Paul Olson to write about their emotionally reserved Scandinavian upbringing in Edina, Minnesota, home of the first indoor mall. Their father would tell them he was a Norwegian who loved his wife so much that he almost told her. The closest the family ever came to hugging was an awkward arm's length pat on the shoulders kid of hug. His parents were married forever and loved each other and their kids, they just never said it. It was just assumed – and satirized brilliantly by the Olson brothers.

Billed as "Fargo Meets Bridesmaids (without the wood chipper or food poisoning)," DON'T HUG ME, WE'RE MARRIED tracks the trap-filled path down the aisle for a couple of couples in a north woods bar in Bunyan Bay, Minnesota. This latest installment in this series of raucous musical comedies boasts a bevy of comical complications, starting with a pair of unconventional proposals and running right up to a rapping minister and a long-married couple struggling to re-ignite the 20-year spark gone dead in their marriage. More than 15 new tunes are on tap for the premiere, including "The Greatest Love Song Ever," "The Marriage Test," "The Day that Bob Dylan Was Here" and "We're All Gonna Die."

Hilarity abounds as the script is basically a combination of vaudeville schtick and Carol Burnett Show skits set in the mosquito-ridden lake country. Campy to the extreme, and played firmly tongue in cheek, Don Schlossman steals the show as the local barkeep Gunner as well as his own sister Trigger, a stun gun happy forest ranger looking to marry Kanute (Bert Emmett, a master of one-liners and double takes), an outdoorsy kind of guy who happens to be Gunner's best friend – and about a foot shorter than the ranger. At one point during an offstage costume/character change, [Don Schlossman](#) carried on a conversation between the siblings in two distinct voices. The audience was in stitches in the best of all possible ways. And I especially loved his unintelligible impersonation of Bob Dylan during "The Day that Bob Dylan Was Here."

As his unhappy, unfulfilled yet loving wife Clara, Rebekah Dunn lights up the stage with her strikingly beautiful voice and physical presence. Officiating at the double wedding after being confirmed online in about 10 minutes, Dunn's rap number "We Are Gathered Here Today" was the musical highlight of the show, ably assisted by the rest of the cast as her back-up rappers.

The beautiful love song "Forevermore" presents a tribute to the long-standing, if somewhat unspoken, devotion between Gunner and Clara, a beautiful ending to their on-going one-upmanship battle that takes place during the show to prove who is being nicer to their spouse. Schlossman and Dunn might be wise to play it a bit more to the audience so we can see their wonderfully loving expressions.

I did not know Kathleen Chen was the understudy for Bernice until after the performance as she was pitch perfect on her songs and didn't miss a step in her dance numbers. Given her rousing and sexy rendition of the "Bunyan Bay High School Fight Song" in cheerleader costume with some rather worn-out pompoms, the audience was more than happy to join in cheering with her! And when she walked out looking like a China doll in her wedding gown, there were audible "wows" and "ahs" from the audience.

Her hapless and adoring groom Aarvid is played by Troy Whitaker, a young man willing to jump through hoops to pass any test given to him so that he can win Bernice's hand (and of course her body) in marriage. Whitaker's limber undulations were an audience hit during his comical musical numbers, especially "What I'll Do When We're Married." Surely any woman would appreciate a husband such as Aarvid.

Stan Mazin's choreography fits perfectly with the show's slapstick TV comedy sketch type humor, which the cast carries off with mocking reverence to old-time musical comedies. There's lots of down home knee slapping and other antics that keep the cast on their toes, so to speak. All the more credit to Kathleen Chen who was a standout in her musical numbers, given this was her first performance with the full cast in front of an audience. You would never have known it.

Thanks to director Doug Engalla, an added touch of wilderness humor happens when certain words are spoken such as "loon" which results in expressive bird calls by Bernice, Kanute and Clara, and "fishing" which inspires Kanute's pelvic thrusts of joy.

To accompany the songs, set designer Chris Winfield built an authentically old-fashioned jukebox called an LSS 562 which switched on the accompany each singer with a nod of his or her head when their number was about to begin. Quite a nice trick and the reason why Aarvid makes a good living selling them to bars as karaoke machines! Winfield's attention to detail can also be seen with the collection of all shapes and sizes of beer bottles which decorate the top of the set, along with authentic beer company signs, a moose head and deer head hanging on the walls – who together deliver the audience welcome to the show introduction.

The Group Rep presents World Premiere Musical Comedy  
**DON'T HUG ME, WE'RE MARRIED**

Book & Lyrics by Phil Olson, Music by Paul Olson

Directed by Doug Engalla and Choreographed by Stan Mazin

Produced by Laura Coker for the Group Rep

Limited Run: October 3 – November 15, 2014

Fridays and Saturdays at 8:00pm, Sundays at 2:00pm

at the Lonny Chapman Theatre 10900 Burbank Blvd. North Hollywood 91601

Reservations: [www.thegroupprep.com](http://www.thegroupprep.com) or (818) 763-5990

Tickets: \$25; Senior/Student: \$20; Group 10+: \$15

Tickets/Information: [www.thegroupprep.com](http://www.thegroupprep.com) or (818) 763-5990

Running Time: 120 minutes plus one intermission

Parking: Ample street parking on Burbank Blvd. and on Cleon Ave. south of the Burbank Blvd

Photos by Doug Engalla