'Spamalot' hilarious musical romp

By Amy McRary

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What were the people at Clarence Brown Theatre thinking when they decided to end the 2013-14 season with the silly musical “Monty Python’s Spamalot”?

I imagine they thought “Let’s have some fun!”

If so, they succeeded with glitter and spangles. “Spamalot,” playing through May 11 at the University of Tennessee theater, is one hilarious romp. It’s easy to see the actors are having fun. By the laughter and show-ending group singalong of “Always Look on the Bright Side of Life,” Thursday night’s preview audience had fun, too.

Where else could one find an often off-course Holy Grail quest and a Lane Kiffin reference? Plus the total collapse of the imaginary “fourth wall” boundary between cast and audience. And lots of bawdy humor, a killer rabbit puppet and a gay Lancelot romance.

“Spamalot” is a loving rip-off of the film “Monty Python and the Holy Grail.” Woven in are spoofs of such musical theater standards as the chorus line, demanding diva and overburdened, understanding sidekick. The show, directed by Bill Jenkins, adds local touches to Eric Idle and John du Prez’s original. Fall, for example, arrives to the tune of “Rocky Top.”

Early on it’s clear “Spamalot” embraces its silliness and acknowledges it’s a production. Christopher Pickart’s beautifully done set includes a rectangular hole in stage center for the orchestra pit. Unseen musicians directed by Terry Silver-Alford play the score and at times become almost another actor. In the first scene, David Kortemeier’s King Arthur singingly warns servant Patsy (played to perfection by Steve Sherman) “to watch the big hole in the center of the stage.”

Kortemeier, whose previous roles this season included Ebenezer Scrooge, displays his acting versatility and vocal ability as Arthur. One of his funniest scenes is with the Lady of the Lake’s cheerleading “Lake Girls” in a “let’s get ready to rumble” basketball takeoff. The well-done choreography by Christie Zimmerman also includes a Vegas-inspired number with Katie Cunningham’s Lady of the Lake as a Cher-inspired singer.

Cunningham, who has a beautiful singing voice, is charming as the Lady of the Lake. When she complains to the audience that she’s not been on stage enough, you agree with her. She also wears the best costumes, changing from one long glittery gown to another. Tim Hatley, “Spamalot’s” Broadway costume designer, did the costumes.

“Spamalot” is the last show for graduate students Micah-Shane Brewer, who plays Sir
Robin, and Tramell Tillman, who’s Lancelot. They’ll be missed. Neil Freidman in drag as Galahad’s mother is a hilarious cameo; I wish the character had more scenes. UT junior Eric Sorrels was fun both as the dancing, jumping “Not Dead Fred” and Lancelot love interest Prince Herbert. Clarence Brown Producing Artistic Director Calvin MacLean made a rare stage appearance and played three supporting roles: a knight of Ni, the hilarious French Taunter and the stern historian who, for all his trouble, gets hit in the head with a shovel at show’s end.

You don’t have to be a Monty Python fan to enjoy “Spamalot.” Just be ready to let the gags and humor play out. And if you sit in a certain seat, you’ll find yourself part of the show.