

Exhausted dance marathoners compete for prizes in front of a live band in Hard Times Hit Parade.

By Jo Ledingham, Vancouver Courier

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HARD TIMES HIT PARADE

At Russian Hall until March 18

Tickets: at the door

dustyflowerpot.org

What's this? Wooden bleachers? And old-style advertising boards mounted around the gym-size hardwood floor performance space? Clutching my brown paper bag of popcorn, I climbed the bleachers and sat down. I had absolutely no idea what I was in for.

Possibly taking their cue from recessionary times, Dusty Flowerpot Cabaret stages this "marathon to end all marathons," and because it's all in good fun, it's good fun. Unlike the contestants in the 1920s and '30s, the dancers don't really collapse or begin hallucinating. But Hard Times Hit Parade really captures the craziness and desperation of the time when professional dance marathoners mingled with local amateurs, all vying for prize money. For those who were really down and out, the 12 small meals a day and a cot to sleep on (15 minutes of every hour), winning would just be icing on the cake. Each marathon went on for weeks, even months, before laws were passed against them, in part because of unscrupulous promoters and because, in the late '30s, war broke out and everyone was employed again. Ironically, good times rolled once more.

Dusty Flowerpot Cabaret is, according to its website, a collaboration of artists, performers and community builders with commitment to memorable, accessible theatrical productions and events. From a core group of 30 members, they produce art, dance, music and performance pieces independently or in collaboration with other arts organizations. This show featured 40 performers on set and another 60 crew and volunteers. All this and Maria in the Shower, a six-piece band with dynamite Jack Garton belting or crooning out the tunes, too. The band, featuring fiddle, accordion and assorted brass, is worth the price of admission all by itself.

Written and directed by Kat Single-Dain, this is a big show, and I loved almost all of it. A couple of segments are too long and don't seem to fit--although it's historical fact that weddings did happen during the dance marathons--especially when the dancers were just dragging each other around and the audience was getting bored.

But Hard Times Hit Parade starts with a gangbuster of a choreographed number with all the dance contestants, each wearing a number on his/her back, dancing to beat the band. The music revs up, fringe flies, little potty hats are clutched, pearl rope necklaces bounce

and the joint really jumps. Yowza, yowza. Couples soon begin to stand out: the brother-sister team of Melvin (Aaron Malkin) and Gladys (writer/director Single-Dain herself), glamorous Marla Dean (Candice Curlypaws), Charlie Keaton (David Yates, who does some languorously sexy solo work with a hat rack), King Brady (Islando Bocock, whose character defaults but before leaving the dance floor, does a gravity-defying spin in a big hoop) and my favourite, little brown cloche-hatted Anni Johnson (Nina Longshadow) whose dance style is something between a squat and a jitterbug.

Also true to history, this Hard Times Hit Parade features a "cot" sequence when the contestants' cots were pulled out of the rest area so they could be watched even while they slept. In this production, the dancers--who, by this time, we are convinced are exhausted--emerge from under their quilts in a bizarre masked dance.

Just under three hours long, Hard Times Hit Parade is a bit of a marathon itself, but it's terrific fun and would be even more so if you dolled up in some vintage threads, plunked a pokey little hat or a fedora on your head, put on your dancing shoes and joined in. You can cut a rug to the music every night after the show except Sunday.

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