

# Theatre review: Hard Times Hit Parade is a hoot-and-a-half

By PETER BIRNIE, **Vancouver Sun**  
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## Hard Times Hit Parade

8 p.m., to March 18

Russian Hall, 600 Campbell Ave.

Tickets: \$20 advance at Highlife, Zulu or RedCat Records, or \$25 at the door

VANCOUVER -- On a day when the Dow was down and the TSX tanking, I found no better way to wonder about our economic future than to drink in a Depression-era dance marathon. The evening was both exhilarating and bum-numbing.

The Dusty Flowerpot Cabaret is an East Vancouver collective so big that cast, crew and an army of volunteers number near 100 for a show dubbed Hard Times Hit Parade. The Russian Hall in Strathcona has been so thoroughly taken back in time that it's fitting many members of a Thursday-night audience showed up wearing Dirty Thirties accoutrements.

Packing three huge banks of purpose-built wooden bleachers, a capacity crowd watched couples shuffle 'round a gymnasium-style dance floor as, on a high stage, Maria in the Shower offered hugely helpful glue for the evening. This quartet of musicians (aided by a couple of friends) is so hot, so tight and so in tune with the thematics of the show — a postmodern take on what Americans once did to survive in the face of poverty — that it helps Hard Times Hit Parade dance past some problems.

All hail Jack Garton, the dashing young bandleader who plays his golden trumpet like Gabriel in fierce battle with the Devil and sings both original compositions and dusty stuff from the era in complete control of gorgeous vocal chords. Oh, he also handles a mean accordion — and has some sultry fun singing in elegant drag.

Innovation is off the scale as we're treated to big and brassy dance routines, small solos, comedy, magic, puppetry, newsreel-style video and, most magically, shadowplay revelations of inner character. It all clocks in at close to three hours but that is, of course, a symbolic (and thus bum-numbing) tribute to contests that once lasted for months.

Writer and director Kat Single-Dain has huge ambitions for her cast of dozens. Each has been handed a specific characterization, largely stereotypes of winners and losers and drunks and dreamers but still nicely framed for the actor to handle.

Unfortunately, abilities are so uneven that some of the players are brilliant, some so-so and a few too green to know how to handle their role. While the story is a straightforward black comedy about all the naughty, bawdy and gaudy people populating this hall, it's up to the actors to flesh things out with lots of improvisational chatter — and not everyone is up to speed on that tough task.

That said, they still all garner collective kudos for working so hard to nail some terrific 1930s choreography. Aging flapper or snappy dandy, everybody moves to fill that floor with a fascinating mix of movements.

Costume designers Alex Danard and Tarran Gabriel also understand the need to keep everything as authentic as possible, making the marathon's many surreal moments all the stranger because they seem to spring up in a plausible past. From a fan dance shouting "hooray for Hollywood" (but singing *You Ought To Be In Pictures*) to the drabest of dresses on the most desperate of contestants, Danard and Gabriel get it just right.

Hard Times Hit Parade is far from perfect. It's also a hell of a hoot.

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