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[History of Musicals](#)

- [What is a musical?](#)
- [Stage](#)
- [Film](#)
- [TV](#)
- [Bibliography](#)

[Musicals 101 Blog](#)

[Special Features](#)

- [Broadway Postcards](#)
- [Broadway Theatres](#)
- [A Chorus Line 101](#)
- [Cabaret 101](#)
- [A Life in Show Business](#)
- [George M. Cohan 101](#)
- [Noel Coward 101](#)
- [Dance in Musicals](#)
- [G&S 101](#)
- [Historic NY Theatres](#)
- [History of Theatre in NY](#)
- [How Musicals Are Made](#)
- [How to Put on a Musical](#)
- [Al Jolson 101](#)
- [Ethel Merman 101](#)
- [The Merry Widow 101](#)
- [Vaudeville 101](#)
- [Ziegfeld 101](#)

[Site Index](#)

[Site Search](#)

[Reference Resources](#)

- [Performance Rights](#)
- [Index](#)
- [Finding](#)
- [Recordings/Scripts](#)
- [Suggested Links](#)
- [Musical Film Index](#)
- [Musical Theatre](#)
- [Research](#)
- [Musicals as History](#)
- [Musicals Calendar](#)
- [Photo Galleries](#)
- [Sample Scenes](#)
- [Sample Lyrics](#)
- [Stage & Film](#)
- [Chronology](#)
- [Vaudeville Research](#)
- [Who's Who in Musicals](#)

[Reviews](#)

- [Stage/Screen Reviews](#)
- [CD Reviews](#)
- [DVD Reviews](#)
- [Book Reviews](#)

Triumph of Love

Astoria Performing Arts Center

Astoria, NY - April 2008

Reviewed by John Kenrick



Abby Baum (Leonide) faces the wrath of the prince she secretly loves, played by Tripp Pettigrew (Agis).

Under-appreciated treasures can be rediscovered on unlikely places. This is especially true in theatre, where all it takes is a troupe with talent and guts to give new life to material mishandled by others.

Triumph of Love did poorly on Broadway, where a stellar cast could not overcome an ill-conceived production, but the show has been redeemed in a handsome and intoxicating staging by the Astoria Performing Arts Center. The fact that they are pulling off this little miracle in the auditorium of a Variety Girls & Boys Club makes their *Triumph* all the sweeter.

Over the last five years, I have seen artistic director **Brian Swasey** lead this company through a series of fresh and captivating productions, turning out first-class professional theatre on shoe-string budgets. This time around, Swasey has the daunting task of staging a romantic fantasy, always a tricky thing to do but especially when its also a musical. *Triumph of Love* is set in ancient Greece, but its trappings suggest 18th Century France and its language carries echoes of Shakespeare, Moliere, and a soupcon of Larry Hart and Cole Porter. Swasey handles this potentially bewildering mix with refreshing flair. He clearly understands that fantasy played with conviction and brio can become magical fun, and the results are a real treat.

The libretto by James Magruder involves a very complex story. In brief, Princess Leonide has fallen in love with Agis, a handsome young stranger. The princess dons a masculine disguise and befriends Agis, only to discover that he is the the rightful heir to her throne and is dedicated to killing her. In her attempts to win Agis's heart, Leonide enlists the help of his servants, romances the two philosophers who have served as his tutors, and eventually places her throne willingly in his hands. Composer Jeffrey Stock and lyricist Susan Birkenhead have energized this tomfoolery with a tuneful and unusually literate score, and it shines when performed by the APAC cast, one of the most solid singing ensembles I have ever seen. They also excel as farceurs, making all the unlikely twists of the plot disarmingly easy to accept.

Justin Birdsong, Philip Deyesso, Tripp Pettigrew and Erika Amato in *Triumph of Love* at APAC.



Abby Baum plays Leonide with powerful pipes and comic flair, while the handsome **Tripp Pettigrew** is every inch

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[Essays](#)

[-Gays and Musicals](#)

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[-Deans List Awards](#)

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[-Complete Idiot's Guide](#)

[to Amateur Theatricals](#)

[-Upcoming Events](#)

[-Lecture Topics](#)

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a fantasy price, believably torn between philosophic principles and his first taste of love. **Richard Rice Alan** is delicious as the dictatorial tutor Hermocrates, and lovely **Erika Amato** dazzles as his spinster sister -- she is a musical knockout, stopping the show with her rendition of "Serenity." **Ashley Spiegel** delights as an energetic sidekick to the princess, **Justin Birdsong** wins laughs as the gardener, and **Philip Deyesso** is a bona fide comic discovery as Harlequin.

Jeffrey Campos provides flawless music direction. The handsome set by **Michael P. Kramer** keeps springing pleasant surprises, and **Erik J. Michael**'s lighting design bathes everything in exactly the right fairy tale glow.

In short, APAC has come up with yet another winner, and *Triumph of Love* has the kind of New York production it always deserved. A triumph indeed!

This production is set to run through May 11, 2008.

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