

Review: History Theatre's Winter Carnival musical tuneful but scattershot

The Winter Carnival-themed show can't seem to figure out where to place its focus



Tara Borman, from left, Adrienne Zimiga-January, Randy Schmeling and Annika Isbell in the History Theatre's premiere production of "Rollicking! A Winter Carnival Musical," a fantasy built upon architect Cap Wigington and his wife being swept into the fantastical legend of King Boreas. It runs at History Theatre in St. Paul through Dec. 21, 2025. (Rick Spaulding / History Theatre)

By [Rob Hubbard](#) | wordhub@yahoo.com | Special to the Pioneer Press

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Considering that St. Paul's History Theatre has spent almost half a century examining Minnesota's stories and presenting them onstage, it's somewhat surprising that the company has never explored the 139-year-old St. Paul Winter Carnival.

That annual frozen festival was created to spark tourism during the state's darkest months and stir locals from hibernation. It's evolved over the years to include parades, ice palaces, sculptures fashioned from ice and snow, a medallion hunt, and a cosplay mythology about the battle between warmth and cold.

Having so much history with which to work, perhaps it's no surprise that History Theatre's "Rollicking! A Winter Carnival Musical" can't seem to figure out where to place its focus. So it goes every which way, cherrypicking from a multitude of carnival-related subjects and tossing them together into a sort of scattershot fantasia, a collage of scenes and songs that are often entertaining, but never add up to anything resembling a story.



Roland Hawkins II, left, and Annika Isbell in the History Theatre's premiere production of "Rollicking! A Winter Carnival Musical," a fantasy built upon architect Cap Wigington and his wife being swept into the fantastical legend of King Boreas. It runs at History Theatre in St. Paul through Dec. 21, 2025. (Rick Spaulding / History Theatre)

So you're likely to leave a performance of the inaptly titled "Rollicking!" unsatisfied, but fully ready to clean up if your neighborhood pub hosts a St. Paul Winter Carnival trivia contest. For the facts do come at you in fast and semi-furious fashion, often delivered by the anthropomorphic Hi-Lex drops of bleach that march in the Winter Carnival parades. They repeatedly interrupt the action to toss historical footnotes at the audience, adding to the feeling that this is the theatrical equivalent of channel surfing or scrolling on social media.

The production's key saving grace is that composer Keith Hovis is clearly a talented songsmith. He's created 18 songs in disparate styles, from bouncy pop to vintage Vaudeville splash and dazzle (with catchy choreography by Joey Miller) to booming beltters a la Adele to a deliciously funky rebellion of the snow queens. So if you just enjoy "Rollicking!" as a carnival-flavored musical revue, you'll probably be better off than those left trying to puzzle out this musical's plot or central conflict.

Playwright Rachel Teagle seems to be constantly chasing after Hovis's music in the vain hope of pinning some sort of story onto it. What she's ended up with is early 20th-century architect "Cap" Wigington designing the 1937 ice palace – his first sung phrase is "find the line," perhaps foreshadowing the playwright's quandary in trying to pull a tale out of this mountain of facts – and being drawn into a kind of Oz or Narnia-like fantasy world where his quest is to... Hard to say, exactly. Hold his marriage together? Save the carnival from capitalist exploitation? It's unclear.

Yet the cast of nine, director Laura Leffler and a quartet of musicians led by Isabella Dawis sell this material with plenty of energy and enthusiasm. Benjamin Dutcher and Randy Schmeling joyfully embrace the silliness of their roles as the key spokesmen on either side of the ice vs. fire debate. Adrienne Zimiga-January strikes a deft balance between clownishness and dignity in her roles. And Wigington and his wife Viola are given powerful voice by Roland Hawkins II and Erin Nicole Farste.

But "Rollicking!" eventually succumbs to the demands of trying to stuff too much history into a two-and-a-half-hour show, likely leaving even the most devoted Winter Carnival fans flummoxed.

'Rollicking! A Winter Carnival Musical'

- **When:** Through Dec. 21
- **Where:** History Theatre, 30 E. 10th St., St. Paul
- **Tickets:** \$78-\$30, available at 651-292-4323 or historytheatre.com
- **Capsule:** An unfocused carnival collage.