

# 'Hello Dolly' brings fun to the neighborhood at Raton's Shuler Theater.

By Tim Keller — For the Comet | Posted: Saturday, March 21, 2015 12:00 am

RATON – The beauty of community theater is that it's made by your neighbors. Musical theater doubles the fun. You see familiar store clerks, technicians, teachers and high school students—some of whom live down the street—all colorfully costumed while they act, sing and dance in bright lights across the big stage.

Does the acting, singing, and dancing rise to professional standards? Of course not—these neighbors have day jobs—but that's part of the fun. And in Raton, where for 100 years the Shuler Theater has drawn its locals to the stage, the talent pool is deep so community theater can be surprisingly good.

Such was the case over the weekend when Raton Choral Society revived a show it had mounted before at the Shuler in 1978. "Hello Dolly" had been a gigantic hit when it reached Broadway in 1964, winning ten Tony Awards including Best Musical. The original cast recording topped Billboard's album chart, only to be knocked off by Louis Armstrong's album entitled "Hello Dolly." When Armstrong's recording of the title song topped Billboard's singles chart, he became the oldest person, at 63, to ever occupy that position, and he did it by knocking The Beatles from a 14-week run atop the charts.

"Hello Dolly" has since been made into a successful film and revived on Broadway three times, so it was no surprise to see Raton Choral Society return to one of its earliest productions to mount its first show in about seven years. Some of the original cast returned in the new production—including Howard Woodworth and John Martin—while Friday night's performance included at least three more—Carol Woodworth, local judge Warren Walton and the company's original Dolly, Dorothy Thompson Smoker, who mounted the stage at curtain call to present red roses to the new Dolly, Brenda Ferri.

Ferri has the acting skills and experience to make meddling New York City matchmaker Mrs. Dolly Gallagher-Levi the larger-than-life character that she is. When she emerged in red at the top of the packed Harmonia Gardens restaurant's staircase for the show's climax, she was like a sun with planets in orbit as the wait staff and patrons danced and sang below her.



Brenda Ferri (center left) took the title role of Dolly Gallagher-Levi in the Raton Choral Society's production of "Hello, Dolly!" last week at the Shuler Theater. See more photos on pages 8 and 9.

The most engaging storylines and comedy revolved around the characters that Dolly paired into happy couples. Susan Ward and Clint Henson brought both stage experience and a sense of delight that made their couple the most fun. Newcomer Zach Osborn did a fine job as Henson's co-worker and friend that later paired with young Laura Robertson—who, like Henson, has natural acting gifts that make her a joy to watch on stage.

A family illness forced veteran actor Rick Trice to leave the production just two weeks ago. Director Howard Woodworth took the key role of Horace Vandergelder, and he did just fine. In his Harmonia Gardens dinner conversation with Ferri's Dolly, he played the straight man to her comic in the production's funniest scene.

Music director Bill Crary left his baton just long enough to play maitre d' Rudolph Reisenweber, where he looked exactly right in the part. Frances Vance joined the cast as an exceptional dancer while her choreography lifted the entire production a couple notches—many of the 28 actors on stage had danced here before, but never so well.

Woodworth, Crary, and Vance wrangled the large cast and technical crew that worked on the production for a couple months. Aided by attractive and effective sets and costumes, their new "Hello Dolly" made a great return for the Raton Choral Society.