

# 'Lend Me a Tenor' a sweet success at Beck Center

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*Kathy Sandham*

**The Beck Center for the Arts** has a hit on its hands with Ken Ludwig's "[Lend Me A Tenor](#)," playing now through April 26 on the Mackey Main Stage. Directed by **Scott Spence**, the hilarious romp into a world of opera and odd opportunity will have young and old chortling throughout.

The fun farce follows Max (Scott Esposito), Maggie (Emily Pucell Czarnota) and Saunders (John J. Polk) as they try to get world-famous Italian opera legend Tito Merelli (Matthew Wright) to their benefit concert for the Cleveland Grand Opera. The night seems doomed from the beginning of the day, as Tito is running very late, the broken refrigerator threatens to ruin the mayo-covered shrimp that's supposed to be served for the reception, and the music gets lost.

As Saunders and Max fret over what to do, they suggest using a stand-in to sing in Merelli's place, as

the character is so well-costumed and prepped with hair and makeup, that the audience might not realize that it's not the actual superstar, as promised.

Luckily, Merelli shows up with his wife Maria (Carla Petroski). Unfortunately, it all continues to go downhill from there. The 1930s-set mayhem continues with mistaken identities, a few too many pills, a frenzy of female fans, a jealous wife, a surprising concert debut, and a lot of doors that go to lots of places.

"It is my great joy to direct this side-splitter again 23 years after my first encounter with it," remarked Director Scott Spence.

The action is quick-paced and well-played, as Esposito's Max grows from nerdy, timid background player to shining star. He's also in love with Maggie and that proves to have its own drama. His endearing affection for her and his suddenly-released vocal prowess make the character likeable, and his singing makes him a solid leading man.

Wright's Merelli is over-the-top-excellent, performing with a big "Italian" passion and devious pluckiness. He is a talented bad boy, yet also a hilarious victim of his own fame. His singing voice is powerful and diva-worthy. His scenes with Petroski are full of fire and lightning-fast banter as they fight with fury and with flair. Their all-out screaming matches are both ridiculous and riveting, leaving the audience breathless with laughter in the wake of their words. They are a perfect pair.

Other performances of note include Czarnota's Maggie (a fawning dreamer), Polk's Saunders (a high-strung, puffing control-freak), Zac Hudak's Bellhop (a stalking super-fan), Leslie Andrews' Diana (a beautiful vocalist looking to get out of Cleveland), and Lissy Gulick's Julia (a bit of a naughty old lady looking to get frisky with the famous guest).

The back-and-forth amongst all characters is wonderful. There are even a few amazingly-played scenes that feel like we're watching a chaotic opera version of the famous "Who's On First?"

Scenic Designer Don McBride's contemporary-feeling set gives a nod to Cleveland with the Terminal Tower gloriously residing outside the hotel room window. Lighting Designer Trad A Burns, Costume Designer Aimee Kluiber and Sound Designer Carlton Guc have all presented visual and audio support to round-out the production in a beautiful manner.

All in all, "[Lend Me A Tenor](#)" is an uproarious frantic foray into a world of who is and who *isn't* on stage, wrapped in with great music, witty writing, and delivered by a great group of actors.

Tickets can be purchased online at [beckcenter.org](http://beckcenter.org) or by calling Customer Service at 216-521-2540 x10. [Beck Center for the Arts](#) is located at 17801 Detroit Avenue in Lakewood. Free onsite parking is available.

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