



Dick Latessa

Triple-Threat Performer

When we first heard Dick Latessa's name it was not with a bang but a whisper.

The sibilant sounds surrounded us as program-reading patrons of Town and Country Musicals scanned the list of performers to find the name of a man who had become a playgoer's favorite.

In his second season at the East Rochester summer theatre, Dick Latessa proved himself a triple threat performer — he sings, he dances and he acts. And you can underline each talent.

The whispered sounds — "that's Dick Latessa," "what's Dick Latessa playing" — did not come from a select few. There were teenagers struck by his charm and Latin handsomeness, but there were middle-aged and experienced theatre-goers who felt the wonderful and constant rapport that spells entertainment.

We have seen this happen in the past. During the days of the now-defunct Arena

Theatre, we remember the same response in the audience to such stellar performers as the late Sarah Scott and now successful TV star Joe Ruskin. And it happened in earlier years for such Rochester favorites as Bert Lytell, Louis Calhern and, before them, this city's own Jessie Bonesteel.

Rewarding as such response is to the actor, it also carries with it a responsibility to the audience, according to Dick Latessa. It keeps the performer on his toes — he must always give his best because he owes his best.

This summer we saw Dick Latessa satirize a hip-swinging Presley-like crooner in Bye Bye Birdie, sink into a Damon Runyonized version of a racetrack tout in Do Re Me and emerge, pure as the driven snow, a love-sick Scotsman in Brigadoon. One week he was a slick-tongued New York newspaper man facing star Pat Carroll in Wonderful Town and later in the season he stretched the vocal chords to render Abbondanza

in his best voice paisano for The Most Happy Fella.

This wasn't enough, however, to keep Dick busy for the summer. He also co-directed, and performed in a Town and Country sponsored series of children's plays. And here you really touch a Latessa soft spot — kids. He says they are the greatest audience in the world and whipped cream for the performer.

He was reminded of an incident in this season's production of Robin Hood in which Dick as the famous hero of Sherwood Forest was being pursued by the villain of the piece.

The villain's little boy was a member of the audience and watched the chase on stage with mounting excitement. When Robin finally climbed a tree to escape the villain, the little boy cried out — "Look out, daddy, he's hiding in the tree!"

Dick Latessa anxiously awaits January when his wife Shirley will present him with the first member of his own private children's audience.

A native of Cleveland, Dick began his career as a dancer on local TV programs. Later he joined the famed Karamu Theatre, first integrated drama group in the country.

And there were other jobs — on a newspaper, as a truck driver, on a factory assembly line and, well, you name it. Also there was a two year "vacation" in the U.S. Army.

Dick will open tomorrow night for the beginning of a nine-performance run in Music Theatre's production of The King and I as the star-crossed lover, Lun Tha. Then it's back to New York with Shirley, baby-to-be and all, where last year he played the season in an off-Broadway revival of The Golden Apple.

Not yet the star he may become, Dick Latessa's name has started with a happy whisper in Rochester — we can hope that it attains a resounding Broadway bang.

Story by Bob Smett

Top left, top right and clown photos furnished by Dick Latessa, others by Paul Contestable.

