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Stef Tovar (center) portrays legendary Notre Dame football coach Knute Rockne in the winning new musical "Knute Rockne All-American."

THEATER REVIEW

Sing one for the Gipper

By Chris Jones
TRIBUNE CRITIC

I have reviewed many new musicals with confirmed Broadway dates in far worse shape than the thrilling new Heartland tuner that just popped up in Munster, Ind., of all places. But I've never reviewed a show in which the big first-act number is titled "Completing the Forward Pass," which sounds far more suitable for ESPN's "NFL Live" than "Live From the Rainbow and Stars."

Aren't sports and musicals supposed to be oil and water? Not here. "Knute Rockne All-American" — book by Buddy Farmer, music by Michael Mahler, lyrics by Mahler and David H. Bell — makes the two seem profitably symbiotic.

Rockne was the legendary 1920s football coach of the Fighting Irish and, arguably, the man who did the most to turn the University of Notre Dame into a semi-mythic Midwestern citadel of college football. You could further argue that Rockne, played here by Stef Tovar, was the archetype of the hard-nosed-but-paternalistic coach, an endlessly

'KNUTE ROCKNE ALL-AMERICAN'

When: Through May 11

Where: Theatre at the Center, 1040 Ridge Rd., Munster, Ind.

Running time: 2 hours, 25 minutes

Tickets: \$36-\$40 at 219-836-3255

imitated sports construct that has sold a lot of newspapers over the years and precipitated many multimillion dollar contracts. And he wasn't even Catholic when he took the job.

Raised poor and scrappy in Logan Square, Rockne turns out to be the ideal subject for a celebratory bio-musical focusing on conflicts such as job versus family, winning versus educating and personal insecurity versus public leadership. And the Rockne era also included a legendary Notre Dame walk-on named George Gipp (Brandon Dahlquist), who proceeded to own the school rushing record for more than half a century. Mahler and Bell wisely avoid a song called "Win One for the Gipper," but Gipp, too, serves as a

powerful archetype here. He was an all-American idol convinced inside that he was an all-American failure. (The musical is not an adaptation of the 1940 film of the same name, in which former President Ronald Reagan famously portrayed Gipp.)

Farmer's book still needs work. Rockne's formative Chicago childhood gets trampled by a needlessly complex opening flashback. Gipp's unexpected death — mysterious in real life — needs far more explanation than it gets here. The show needs to spend a bit less time on the train and in a South Bend speakeasy and a bit more inside Rockne's fascinating skull and on the football field — imagine if a really top choreographer got hold of that latter possibility. And, given recent scandals, it should also go deeper into the dark side of big-time collegiate athletics — and Rockne's role in its creation.

But with this show, the problems don't present themselves as much as the possibilities.

The massively talented Mahler has penned a very appealing and melodic score that

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fuses the collegiate harmonies of the era with a more traditional Broadway style. The lyrics are smart and witty. At one point in the second act, Rockne's long-suffering wife, Bonnie (the delightful Kate Fry), sings about the lack of roses in her life. That would be a

cliche, were it not sung as her husband coaches the Rose Bowl.

The score should take bigger risks — the show overall could use more grit and grunt. But many of the melodies, such as "There's Something in the Game" and "Under the Golden Dome," are genuinely stirring. They really capture the ethos of the collegiate

game — which I don't think anyone in the theater has ever managed before.

The performances in Bell's zestfully staged show come with guts. Dahlquist, an emerging Chicago talent, powerfully captures Gipp's internal contradictions. And although Tovar is an actor who sings rather than a bravura vocalist, he's entirely credible here as a

tough-necked guy who fights his way to glory. Unlike most movies and teleplays about over-intense coaches, this show really makes you care about the man on the sidelines.

All this and the original Gipper too. "Knute Rockne: All American" is just getting started.

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