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'Knute Rockne' premiere wins one for the Gipper

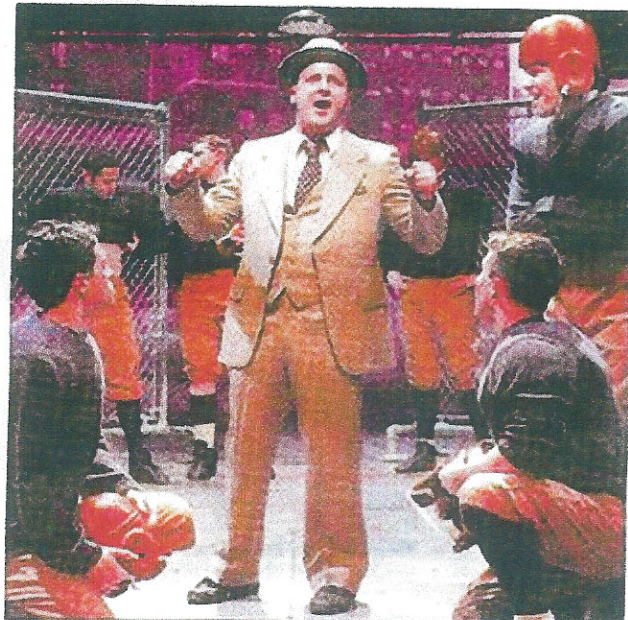
THEATER | Munster team scores with new football musical

BY HEDY WEISS

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It might be close to heresy to confess this, but I couldn't care less about football. Yet I was completely enthralled by "Knute Rockne, All-American," the richly emotional, beautifully crafted, multidimensional new musical now in a fast-paced, sophisticated world premiere at Theatre at the Center in Munster, Ind. The theater, quite fittingly, is not far from Notre Dame University's South Bend campus, where the story of the coach who put college football on the map played out for real during the 1920s.

The show brings together the considerable talents of Michael Mahler (an enormously gifted young composer-lyricist-actor), writer Buddy Farmer, David H. Bell (the veteran director, choreographer, and co-lyricist here, who possesses a unique gift for setting the rhythm and tone of a show), and Valerie Maze (musical director-conductor). And it tells a familiar story: How Rockne (Stef Tovar), the smart, ambitious, hard-working son of a Norwegian Protestant immigrant heads off to a Catholic university and, despite his promising future as a research chemist, decides to focus on coaching football. He not only shapes a winning team and mentors the now fabled player, George Gipp, aka "The Gipper" (Brandon Dahlquist), but along the way envisions how this sport, for better and for worse, could galvanize a university's spirit, generate cash and serve as a crucial publicity machine.



Stef Tovar stars in "Knute Rockne, All-American: A Musical" at Theatre at the Center in Munster, Ind.

'KNUTE ROCKNE, ALL-AMERICAN: A MUSICAL'

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

When: Through May 11

Where: Theatre at the Center, 1040 Ridge Road, Munster

Tickets: \$36-\$40

Phone: (219) 836-3255

It's a retrospective journey — reeling backward to the early days when Rockne first headed off to Notre Dame. Woven into the tale of how he pulled his players together and did everything in his power to support Gipp (a sort of surrogate son) is the sense that he put his own family on the back burner.

The Mahler-Bell score is sensational, from the ache of

"The Long Ride Home," "Father and Son," "Confession" and "If There Had Been Roses," to the anthemic punch of "There's Something in the Game" and the rip-roaring "The Shift," for which Bell has choreographed a brilliant counterpoint of athletics and tap dance. The strong, compact Tovar, intense and introspective, delivers his finest performance to date as a driven, quietly inspirational man. Blond, muscular Dahlquist is perfection as the self-destructive and surprisingly gentle man who cringes at being a hero. And Kate Fry, as Rockne's wife, Bonnie, makes every moment count in her lovely rendering of several big scenes. The "Knute Rockne" team kicks this one cleanly between the uprights.

A longer version of this review is at www.suntimes.com.



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'Knute Rockne' scores

Theatre at the Center in Munster, Ind., has a big winner with new football musical