

You're Not Just for Kids, "Charlie Brown": Music Guild Takes On Charles M. Schulz

Written by Mike Schulz

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The comic-strip world of Charles M. Schulz's "Peanuts" characters has long delighted children, and the original, 1967 production of the musical *You're A Good Man, Charlie Brown* – with its cheerful tunes and hummable score – has long been a staple for young performers, having been consistently produced in high schools, middle schools, and even elementary schools across the country.

Yet the unexpected thrill of the show's 1999 revival lies in a single line uttered by Charlie Brown's little sister, the bossy, four-year-old Sally (a character who doesn't exist in the musical's original version). Entering the scene with a jump rope and a look of dejection, she says, sullenly, "I was jumping rope ... and all of a sudden everything seemed so *futile*."

Sally's pronouncement may not be understood by young "Peanuts" fans, but it's elemental to the enjoyment of *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown* for *adult* audiences; its blend of youthful vivacity and adult wit is what director Harold Truitt hopes to bring to the Quad City Music Guild's production of this *Charlie Brown* revival, running at Moline's Prospect Park Auditorium March 31 through April 2.

Though – through frequent school-musical productions – many local audiences may be familiar with the show, with its music and lyrics by Clark Gesner, it's a safe bet they won't be familiar with *this* show. Director Michael Mayer's 1999 revival gave the material a fresh spin, as Gesner excised old scenes and songs, added new ones, and traded the character of Peppermint Patty for Sally (a role for which Kristen Chenoweth received a 1999 Tony Award), and Truitt, for one, couldn't be more pleased with this new version of *Charlie Brown*. "This is positively an awesome show," he says. "It's a delight to do."

Judging by the critical response to the Broadway re-tooling, it's also a delight to *watch*. Although the musical's 1967 incarnation did earn some positive reviews – in the *New York Times*

, Walter Kerr wrote, "Almost everything works, because almost everything is effortless" – they paled in comparison to the glowing notices Mayer's revival received.

In *USA Today*, David Patrick Stearns wrote, "*You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown* has been

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snatched from relative obscurity and given a makeover as few shows have," adding that the show was "a confection of primary colors, tuneful music, and comedy sketches, all conveying the wonder of discovering the world as well as the awkwardness of getting used to it. It's an entertainment that's great for kids but maybe better for adults."

And in the *New York Times*, Vincent Canby called the *Charlie Brown* revival "a gentle, wise, very cheering entertainment" that "demands a certain knowledge of and affection for Schulz's work," as the comic artist's accomplishment "has been to create children who are recognizable both as children and as the adults they will become."

This merging of youthful and adult sensibilities, though, has always been key to the continued success of the "Peanuts" comic strip. "A lack of conventional cuteness was what allowed Mr. Schulz's dot-eyed, round-headed creatures to conquer America in the 1950s," wrote Ben Brantley in the *New York Times*. Schulz, he continued, "cannily created a world of children shaped by an age of anxiety. The atomic bomb, Sigmund Freud, and Albert Einstein were not usual topics of conversation in 'Peanuts,' but depression, rejection, sour stomachs, and the meaningless of existence were." (Hence, "Everything seemed so futile.")

"Charlie Brown," Brantley summarized, "spoke directly to the nagging fears and self-doubts that many adults were beginning to realize they would never outgrow."

Weighty themes for a "children's entertainment," and many of *Charlie Brown's* musical numbers reveal a similar, grown-up complexity.

The show's "Book Report" number, for example, features Charlie Brown, Lucy, Linus, and Schroeder grappling with a homework assignment on *Peter Rabbit*, and Linus explains the means by which he'll attack the subject: "In this report," he states, "I plan to discuss the sociological implications of family pressures so great as to drive an otherwise moral rabbit to perform acts of thievery which he consciously knew were against the law. I also hope to explore the personality of Mr. McGregor in his conflicting roles as farmer and humanitarian."

Yet the song's lyrics are just as knotty, as Schroeder, in a breathless cascade of words, explains how *Peter Rabbit* reminded him of *Robin Hood*: "And the part where little John jumped from the rock to the Sheriff of Nottingham's back / And then Robin and everyone swung from the trees in a sudden surprise attack / And they captured the sheriff and all of his goods and they carried him back to their camp in the woods and the sheriff was guest at their dinner and all but he wriggled away and he sounded the call and his men rushed in and the arrows flew / Peter Rabbit did sort of that kind of thing, too."

"It's very difficult, musically, to do that one," Truitt says in reference to "Book Report." "That [song] is technically done as an exercise piece for *opera*; ensembles use that because it is difficult. The tempos are never one and the same. They change

within

the song." Throughout the entire show, Truitt says, "the music is extremely well-done, well-written, but it's difficult. As simple as the show may appear, it's

very

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difficult to do.”

That wasn't always the case with *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*, as Truitt says the differences between “the simplicity of the first one and the complexity of this one are so vast

.” Musically, the 1967 version used “primarily piano, drums, and maybe one other instrument” for the show's orchestrations, yet the revival requires a full orchestra, including the viola, bass, and reed instruments. “It was just so simplistic,” he says of the 1967 version. “There wasn't any of this grandiose underscoring of dialogue.”

The revival, Truitt adds, also features “two new songs [Schroeder's “Beethoven Day” and Sally's “My New Philosophy”], and they're delightful additions to the show,” the music for which has, he says, “been cleaned up” and “tightened up” from its 1967 forebear.

Thankfully, says Truitt, he has a terrific six-person cast – J. Adam Lounsberry (Charlie Brown), Jodi McGinn (Lucy), Kevin Snell (Linus), Jenny Winn (Sally), Dan McGinn (Schroeder), and Nathan Bates (Snoopy) – on hand to bring this unexpectedly challenging production to life. “I have the cream of the crop,” he extols. Truitt has worked in theatre, he says, “since I was little” – having directed for Music Guild regularly since his 1989 production of *Singin' in the Rain* – and his

Charlie Brown

cast has proven one of the most adept ensembles he's yet worked with. “I've encountered many, many wonderful singers over the years,” he says, “but these six together! ... These are six extremely talented people. Just

amazingly

talented.”

These talents have the task of making this new *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown* accessible – and enjoyable – for both the youths

and

the adults of Schulz's fan base, and Truitt states that all “Peanuts” aficionados, regardless of age, should find themselves delighted by Music Guild's endeavor. “I think he [Schulz] wrote ‘Peanuts’ with everyone in mind,” says the director. “

Everyone

has a child in them. And if you've experienced the comic strip at all in your life – even if you've read it only once – you'll really, truly enjoy this show.”

Quad City Music Guild will present 7:30 p.m. performances of You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown
March 31 through April 2
at Moline's Prospect Park Auditorium. For tickets, call (309)762-6610.