

Augustana College's "Quilters" Shows True Colors of Pioneer Life

Written by Jill Walsh
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I always love seeing the plays at Augustana College for the acting skill, detailed and appropriate set designs, and beautifully constructed costumes and props. The musical *Quilters* – which finishes a two-week run this weekend – is no exception, with an ensemble of seven vocally talented women, live keyboard and fiddle players, and an elaborate display of at least 30 quilts hand-made by Augustana students and faculty.

And although Molly Newman's and Barbara Damashek's script is mostly well-written with some sweet songs and excellent transitions, it was at some points like churning butter to get through. Life was tedious for many pioneer women, whose duties consisted of childbearing and -rearing and household chores, and we get a sense of this dullness during the second act, when the slow-moving hymns and tales of mourning are indistinct and seem to run into each other. The rest of the script, however, is colorful and lively, portraying folk dances and engaging vignettes.

Quilters consists of American pioneer women's stories, drawing from the process of quilting.

Focusing specifically on the mother of the Bonham family and her six daughters, the action moves in a circular pattern. We begin and end with the final deathbed instructions from Sarah Bonham to her daughters to pass along the family quilt from eldest to youngest daughter throughout the years. The action then progresses chronologically through the childhood years of the daughters and the hardships brought by harsh winters, difficult chores, and illness.

Life on the prairie was no easy task, and the women eased their minds and united their ever-growing families through the hobby of quilting. As one person (cited by the dramaturg) notes, "Pioneer women made quilts to keep their families warm. They made them beautiful to keep their hearts from breaking." These women were aware of the hardships of pioneer life but wanted to ease their children's struggles. The quilts served the physical purpose of warming the families, but also were aesthetically pleasing and full of family memories.

These quilts were given to newlyweds and provided essential warmth against the cold winds. They symbolized friendships and told stories within their pieces. They comforted families who had lost loved ones. An astonishing fact included in the dramaturg's notes was that pioneer women in the early 1800s bore children every 26 to 30 months, and 60 percent of women raised six to nine children.

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All of the emotions, struggles, and joyful celebrations that accompanied life on the prairie are played out on-stage through song, folk dance, and monologue. The live fiddle (Amber Dahlen) and keyboard (Ron May) players provided an immediate sense of action and a lovely background soundtrack to the show. The music is a combination of folk, bluegrass, hymn, and country with sweet lullabies such as "Little Babes That Sleep All Night" and knee-slapping dances such as "Hoedown."

Musically was where the actors shined, providing beautiful vocals and movements to heartbreaking songs including "The Butterfly" (sung by Susanne Kepley), "The Windmill Song" (Erika Brown and Lilia Glubisz), and "Green, Green, Green" (Amy Fischl). The acting and vocals of all seven performers were harmonized and mature, with each contributing individual pieces of dialogue and song but still working together as an ensemble.

Most impressive about *Quilters* were the hand-made quilts, which obviously took many hours to put together. Production Designer Patty Koenigsaecker and her crew of 14 quilters produced the unbelievably elaborate designs that were called for in the script. The action is divided into about 16 parts, and each has a quilt representing it. So the wedding vignette has the symbolic Double Wedding Ring design. Upon the announcement and explanation of each vignette by the actors, the representative quilt is unfolded and displayed to the audience. The large blue-sky prairieland backdrop quilt is simply beautiful and serves as a colorful contrast to the otherwise neutral scenery and costumes.

The musical *Quilters* at Augustana College is an interesting view of life for pioneer women and the hardships they endured. Though slow at moments, the show is worth seeing for the history and traditions it revives through the eyes of two generations of quilting women.

Quilters will be performed at 8 p.m. May 6, 7, and 8 in Augustana College's Potter Hall, within Bergendoff Hall. Tickets are \$7 and can be reserved by calling (309)794-7306.