

"Pippi" Never Starts Making Sense: "Pippi Longstocking" at the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse

Written by Mike Schulz
Tuesday, 19 April 2005 18:00

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So far as I know, there are no steadfast rules regarding children's theatre, but two certain "don't"s would have to be: (1) Don't bore the kids, and (2) Don't confuse the kids.

At just under 45 minutes, *Pippi Longstocking*, playing through May 7 at the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse, shouldn't have much chance to bore anyone. Yet at the performance I attended Monday, the youthful audience didn't seem to understand what was going on, and frankly, the kids weren't alone. The show is based on the fanciful antics of the beloved, powerfully strong redhead from children's literature, yet based on the evidence here, what might have worked in print doesn't translate well to the stage.

A lot happens in this *Pippi Longstocking* – Pippi goes on safari, has a slapstick rendezvous with bullies, attends the circus, enjoys a surprise party – but nothing that occurs serves any identifiable storyline or is part of a unifying theme; they're comic routines without any point.

Pippi Longstocking

merely careens from one random event to the other – watching it feels like reading every *other*

chapter of the book – and just when a sequence is developing some comic momentum, or when the audience is beginning to enjoy the show's characters –

Poof!

– the scene ends and we're heading somewhere new.

Pippi is colorful, and it's brisk, but it isn't particularly enjoyable; no one is asking children's theatre to have the artistry of O'Neill, but it should at least be *coherent*. (Sometimes even the *dialogue* is incoherent, as when Pippi asks her neighbor, "Won't you please join me for a cup of tea?" and her friend replies, "

Do

I?")

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Under the circumstances, some cast members fare well. As Pippi, Nicole Polzella is suitably wide-eyed and youthfully eccentric; Andrea Moore, as neighbor Mrs. Lindgren, narrates with comedic snippiness (at least she does at *first* ... at some indeterminate point, the script simply drops the convention of the on-stage narrator altogether); and in a variety of roles, Robert E. Harris, Brad Hauskins, Janos Horvath, and John F. Kassimatis bring the production some sorely needed vitality. Their routines make as little sense as anything in the show, but at least they're performed with gusto – *Pippi's* biggest laugh is Horvath's Hans & Franz *homage* as the circus weightlifter – and they're certainly more engaging than the rhythmless scenes between Pippi and the kids next door, which go on twice as long as they need to.

Director Adam Michael Lewis has the good sense to include moments of audience participation, and even some on-stage improvisation, to help keep the kids alert. But, sadly, there's nothing he can do about the show's drippy, pseudo-pop songs, its disorienting, out-of-the-blue finale – some of us were still waiting for the production to *start* – and its lack of anything resembling a proper story. I wish I knew who was mostly to blame for this unfortunate *Pippi Longstocking*, but the production's program doesn't list the name of the playwright. I doubt that's coincidental.