

Ghostlight's "Will Rogers Follies" a Spirited Mess

Written by Mike Schulz
Tuesday, 26 July 2005 18:00

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Overreaching in the arts is often a good thing. Take, for example, *The Will Rogers Follies*, the latest presentation from Ghostlight Theatre, Inc. This is a hugely ambitious musical comedy. Not only does it aim to reproduce the experience of the Ziegfeld Follies stage shows in all their splendor and extravagance, but it's

meta

-theatre as well. The production is narrated by Rogers (Shane Partlow), who freely admits to being dead for decades, yet Rogers also converses onstage with the actual Ziegfeld (voiced by the show's director, Steve Flanigin), and other performers drop in and out of character to comment on the action as it progresses. Rogers also receives occasional visits from a long-dead pilot (Dr. Walter E. Neiswanger), while we in the audience are treated to musical contributions from others who are, similarly, deceased.

The Will Rogers Follies takes theatrical artifice to an almost unimagined level; it's a show-within-a-show-within-a-show-within-a-show, and I may even have missed a couple of "within-a"s there. Obviously, this musical is a bit of a mess, but there's so much happening that the mess is certainly an enjoyable one; your head can spin from the different levels of reality and *surreality* going on.

Though their production is far from seamless, it's to Ghostlight's credit that they've pulled *Will Rogers*

off as well as they have, and the opening number, in fact, is a pretty fair example of everything that's right and wrong with the show.

Before we meet our ghostly lead, the show opens with a number in the classic Ziegfeld tradition, with roughly a dozen-and-a-half ensemble players and the character of Ziegfeld's Favorite (a saucy, yet nicely subtle, Jessica Hiatt) engaged in a wildly vigorous song-and-dance. Director Flanigin makes excellent use of the stage space, and Kathy Schutter's choreography is almost *beyond* inspired – this is the kind of exquisitely orchestrated dance number that can leave audiences standing and cheering. (The choreography in Act II's "Our Favorite Son" is nearly as amazing, and it's performed while the cast is

seated

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Trouble is, the number might be too well-choreographed for the abilities of the show's performers, who – on opening night, at least – were having a hard time keeping up. Who could blame them? The routines that Flanigin and Schutter have come up with would be intimidating to most show-biz veterans, and while many of the actors list years of dance experience in their bios, Ghostlight's cast of Follies girls and cowboys is a young one – I doubt that even Twyla Tharp was *Twyla Tharp* in high school.

Yet their lack of finesse is exactly what makes the number so charming. I *liked* that the choreography was a bit out of the performers' reach, because everyone on that stage was working so hard to look like Broadway sensations and their smiles

never

dropped – the ensemble was going to pull off this show-stopping routine if it

killed

them. Experiencing this much good energy this early in the production was a bit overwhelming, and it took all my self-control to keep from laughing out of sheer happiness.

Nearly all of *Will Rogers* elicits this blend of "Well, they didn't quite pull it off..." and "...but they sure earn points for trying!" One of the show's conventions is that the curtain will drop after a number, and the leading actors will perform routines while the set gets changed behind them; when the curtain is raised, then, we'll be transported to a completely new musical-comedy universe. Yet since Ghostlight, understandably, doesn't have access to the insane budget

The Will Rogers Follies

properly calls for, this convention invariably leads to some disappointment – the curtain continually rises to reveal... a few different set-pieces. The costumes and lighting, though, are sensational, and the set itself is more than serviceable; again, we're not bowled over, but we're at least tickled. (We're also tickled by the show's performing canines and the young children playing the Rogers' kids... W.C. Fields would have

hated

this show.)

As Rogers, Shane Partlow is relaxed and authoritative, with a lazy drawl that implies years of contentment, and he performs his rope tricks spectacularly; the role doesn't allow much variety, but he's certainly pleasant. Kimberly Kurtenbach, as Will's wife, Betty, is much more. She plays the role straight and slyly comments on it simultaneously (her sizing up of Ziegfeld's Favorite is a bitchy hoot), and is always in marvelous voice – area theatre-goers are fortunate to have the radiant, gifted Kurtenbach back among us. And Peter Soderberg is fantastically energetic as Will's (oft-dead) pop, who performs a series of second-banana functions; Soderberg's comic annoyance at how ridiculously his character is used in the show is the production's best running gag.

Mention must also be made of Jonathan Fowler, Paris Kerr, J. Daniel Lauritzson, and Ryan Westwood, who compose the show's cowboy ensemble, and whose four-part harmonies are tight and impressive. (In a delightful touch, they also croon in the lobby – beautifully – as the audience is leaving the auditorium.) The *Will Rogers* book doesn't give this quartet much to do acting-wise, but if any local producers are thinking about doing

Forever Plaid

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, the boys you're looking for may be right here.

By now, I'm hoping that most of *Will Rogers'* technical mishaps have been corrected; last Thursday, Partlow's body mic was off for two entire numbers, leaving the actor inaudible, there were noticeable scene-change snafus, and several times the rumbling of the sound system was so overpowering I had the vague notion that the Holzworth Performing Arts Center was housed atop an underground missile silo, and we had just reached DEFCON-2. But even those obvious, and often distracting, glitches couldn't detract from the show's charm. Ghostlight's

The Will Rogers Follies

is a pretty good production with heart and sky-high ambition; its sweetness of spirit makes "pretty good" pretty good indeed.