## Big Rewards in a "Little" Package: "Stuart Little" at the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse

Written by Mike Schulz Tuesday, 29 November 2005 18:00

Stuart Little, the family musical currently being produced at the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse, is a near-perfect melding of actors and material, a musical comedy so creative and ebullient that you are instructed to secure tickets even if you don't have any kids on hand to chaperone you. The show has the sweetness of spirit that E.B. White's beloved tale requires, but it's better enjoyed as an ingenious vaudeville entertainment; with little overt plotting to get in the way, *Stuart Little* 

gives audiences a bevy of delightful musical and comedy sketches, and even though some of the songs are humdrum, the presentation never

is. Circa '21's production isn't just a topnotch family entertainment; it's a topnotch entertainment, period.

As it tells its tale of the cheeky, clever rodent with the human family, this *Stuart Little* – written by Joseph Robinette – reveals itself to be both literate and rather beautifully constructed, with actors walking in and out of different roles throughout, and it gives director Ty Stover numerous opportunities for visual invention. A few of the songs, "When You Size Up a Fella" and "Natural Enemies," especially, run about twice as long as they need to, but Stover's staging is often phenomenally clever – the scenes in the Littles' home are like

Leave It to Beaver

with gentle irony – and his use of oversized building blocks to create set pieces is a smashing idea; it feels like the whole show is taking place in an emormous toy chest.

The cast is, across the board, fantastic. As Stuart, Bret Churchill often fools you into thinking he's *merely* charming, but then he'll reveal his beautiful singing voice, or wow you with a clever bit of comic panache, and the breadth of his talent becomes undeniable, and most impressive. (Churchill's reading of "Who ... was that?" when the beautiful Harriet Ames walks past Stuart is brilliantly delivered.)

The six performers who join Churchill play a multitude of characters, take turns narrating the tale, and are all terrifically inventive. Brad Hauskins, currently displaying similar versatility in Circa '21's *Christmas from the Heart*, is a stitch playing a villainous kittie à *la* Sinatra in *Guys & Dolls* 

and when the sensational Janos Horvath joins him in dese-dem-dose mode, the comic effects are delirious. Hauskins and Horvath play off one another with affection and peerless timing. As for Tom Walljasper, who often resembles a Rankin-Bass figure come to life, he's such a dynamic stage presence that it's impossible to take your eyes off him, yet, amazingly, his work never overshadows that of the others; he lends his roles comic force and utter sincerity but never showboats. He's marvelous.

The women in the ensemble, unfortunately, don't have as much to work with, but they're all sweet and funny, and get to display their comic grace when given the chance: Sunshine Woolison's gentle heartbreak as Harriet Ames is a lovely contrast to the feisty, ingratiating spiritedness of her other characters, and Andrea Moore (who also serves as the show's gifted choreographer) has a nuttily amusing sequence, playing a dental assistant, that shows her to be a subtle, naturally witty scene-stealer. (Her nasal inflections in the role are tartly funny.) And I'm ecstatic to finally have the chance to write about Liz Coyne, whom I was fortunate to see in

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Assumption High School's spring production of *State Fair*, in which she revealed an almost intimidating amount of talent. (Coyne is currently a senior at Assumption.) With her fizzy effervescence and a gorgeous singing voice, Coyne fits in effortlessly well with her co-stars, which is high praise indeed.

But what truly makes this cast memorable is their work as an ensemble, and to the audience's delight, *Stuart Little*'s seven actors rarely leave the stage. They're often employed in the background as a visual – and comedic – contrast to those in the foreground, and even when the actors aren't in the scene proper, they're often on-stage watching the proceedings with active, engrossed expressions. The effect is wonderful; it gives the audience plenty to look at, and showcases this group as just not focused on their own contributions, but on the contributions of the others – the show has a refreshingly honest warmth. Not to give anything away, but the conclusion sets the stage for a *Stuart Little* 

sequel quite nicely, and if Robinette has one out there, and if Circa '21 can recruit Ty Stover and his tremendous ensemble for it, I'm already

lining up for tickets.

Stuart Little will be performed at Circa '21 Thursdays through Tuesdays through December 27. For showtimes and tickets, call (309)786-7733, extension 2