

Old-Fashioned Entertainment with the "Modern" Touch: "Thoroughly Modern Millie" at Timber Lake

Written by Mike Schulz

Tuesday, 06 June 2006 23:30

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From the Quad Cities, a trip to the Timber Lake Playhouse will take roughly 80 minutes. But I was so happy to be returning to Mt. Carroll, Illinois, for its 2006 season opener, *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, that I don't think I stopped smiling once during the entire trek. The theatre's 2005 presentations of *The Full Monty* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* were, for me, two of last summer's absolute high points - both shows beautifully staged and refreshingly risky - and the venue itself, nestled in the woods, is large and inviting, with its productions boasting terrific design and costumes and a game, go-for-broke ensemble. It was a thrill to be returning after 10 months.

My smiles were a testament to the Timber Lake experience. As a testament to the *Thoroughly Modern Millie*

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experience, I smiled almost continuously during this musical's entire two-and-a-half hours, too. And – with ticklish images from the show dancing through my head – during the entire 80-minute drive home.

Set in the Big Apple circa 1922, the titular character (Erin Childs) leaves the suffocating confines of her native Kansas for the chance to be a swingin', jazz-age "modern" in NYC, and anyone who yawns at the prospect of another small-town-girl-uncovers-the-perils-of-life-in-the-big-city tale should be pleasantly surprised – this part of *Millie's* story is handily dispatched within the show's first five minutes. From then on, *Millie* is a hellzapoppin' grab bag of romantic turmoil, high and low comedy, freewheeling dance routines, and a splendidly silly plot involving the sale of budding young actresses into the Korean white-slavery market. (Trust me – this plays *much* funnier than it sounds.)

It's a bizarre, sometimes sticky mix. *Millie* is both a traditional book show and, like *Urinetown* (which Timber Lake will stage later this month), an ironic commentary on them, and this blend of reverence to jazz-age stylings – particularly in the lively but repetitive score – and irreverence to genre conventions makes *Thoroughly Modern Millie* an occasionally muddled musical. (The characters of George Gershwin and Dorothy Parker as employed as punchlines here, and Parker herself is practically a punching *bag* .)

Yet under the direction of Brad Lyons, and with the gifted James Beaudry as choreographer, Timber Lake's production triumphs over the spottiness of the material. Employing a revolving set with dexterous aplomb, Lyons' staging is wonderfully inventive – particularly in the scenes of Millie awash in the steno pool – and some of the musical numbers here possess the kind of delirious high spirits that make you want to applaud *several* times in the middle of them; the show's renditions of "Forget About the Boy," "The Speed Test," and the title number are practically the *reason* some of us love musicals.

As Millie, Erin Childs is a totally untraditional ingénue. She has a slender build but – I'm guessing – stands at about five feet tall, and the vigor and tenacity that comes from that tiny frame is almost intimidating; her vocal (and comic) cadences suggest Sarah Jessica Parker's

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bossy kid sister. But her unconventionality turns out to be a blessing. Childs possesses a strong, lovely soprano, and her romantic yearnings feel genuine, yet nothing about her is expected, which gives the production tremendous rooting interest; it's a kick watching this pixie powerhouse command the stage through sheer force of personality. (By contrast, Seth Lieber, portraying Millie's romantic foil, Jimmy, is a *completely* traditional ingénue, and this turns out to be less of a blessing – Lieber can't seem to find much to do with his rather uninteresting role.)

The show's standout portrayal, however, comes from Meredith Gifford as the nefarious Mrs. Meers, and to say Gifford is an inspired comedienne doesn't begin to do her justice. The role could easily be offensive – Meers, the orchestrator of that white-slavery subplot, poses in Asian drag, substituting "r"s for "l"s and such – but Gifford is so spectacularly funny that any qualms about the character are immediately silenced; the actress is blazingly, enthrallingly confident. (Note to the *Millie* company: We probably would have given the production a standing ovation *anyway* ; Gifford's curtain call just made us rise all the *sooner* .)

Timber Lake's 2006 ensemble, thus far, suggests that 2005's sensational crop of performers was no aberration. Kyle Sandall is a dynamically fatuous Mr. Trevor, and especially hilarious as a starry-eyed romantic dork; Abby Haug – a divine tapper – barks and swoons with robust authority; Sarah Dothage, as Muzzy, is a warm, radiant presence with a gloriously rich voice; and Charles Thao and Kevin Schuering play Mrs. Meers' hapless Korean aides with buoyant sweetness – they help make the musical's unorthodox happy ending most happy indeed.

And it's wonderful seeing some returning 2005 performers back for the summer. Ella Mouria Seet – so great in *The Full Monty* – is radiantly dim as Miss Dorothy, her incandescent flightiness a delightful treat. Although he has little to do here, I was glad to see Christopher Russell in the ensemble (his Frolo in *Hunchback* was superb), and the exquisitely energetic Justin Sample, the most dynamic of *Millie*'s male chorus, manages to steal a scene with one *line* – I can't wait for future productions when, hopefully, he'll get a few more.

Timber Lake's *Thoroughly Modern Millie* is a rambunctious, invigorating good time, filled with charm and a series of inventive running gags, along with some *unintentional*

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running gags: At Friday's performance, the frequent, awkward arrival of an overhead set-piece, suggesting an elevator, was greeted with audience titters (and an inspired improv by Gifford), and a dropped pencil stayed onstage for so long that it threatened to become a supporting *character*

. At this production, though, even the goofs were joyful ones. If any potential audience members are hesitant about the drive, don't be; chattering over your giddy responses to *Millie*

with your theatergoing companion will make that 80 minutes go by in a flash.

For tickets, call (815) 244-2035.