

Tired and Feathered: "The Ugly Duckling," at the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse through July 29

Written by Mike Schulz
Tuesday, 18 July 2006 22:25

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Anyone old enough to read this - anyone old enough to *read* - is probably too old to enjoy *The Ugly Duckling* at the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse.

For those who don't normally attend the venue's family musicals, this news may not come as a shock. Yet the uninitiated should know that, for more grown-up audiences, Circa '21's youth-oriented productions are oftentimes just as engaging as their evening offerings; this past winter, the theatre's funny, witty *Stuart Little* was every bit the equal of its *Christmas from the Heart*, and I found more personality on display in 50 minutes of *Aesop's Dynamic Duo* than in more than two hours of *Cats*.

The Ugly Duckling, though, doesn't work - at least, it doesn't work *here*. I suppose it's possible that something lighthearted and charming *could* come from this script, even considering its dull book and aimless songs, but the piece is far too

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slight for Circa '21's performance space; the show is being undone by its own venue. Given how minimally populated

Duckling

is (it's rare when more than three of the production's five cast members are on stage simultaneously), the enormity of Circa '21 makes the show - with its paucity of action and tinny music - feel negligible, and the set doesn't do it any favors, either.

Necessity dictates that Circa '21 produce *The Ugly Duckling* on the same playing area as its current production of *On Golden Pond*, and *Duckling*

director Tom Walljasper stages a nice, wordless sequence at the start in which the show's narrator (Janos Horvath) covers

Pond

's furniture with green-tinted camouflage drapery, ostensibly turning

Pond

's cabin into

Duckling

's enchanted forest.

I wish I could call the ruse a success. But while I'm always happy to use my imagination, particularly in a children's theatre production, this was a bit more than my imagination could bear. Designed by Stephanie Gerckens (whose terrific work I unjustly neglected to mention in my *Pond* review), the *On Golden Pond* set is sprawling and detailed but it isn't exactly *magical*, and placing a tarp over a couch can't change that. This beautifully lived-in locale works against *Duckling*

's fairy-tale material - as do the infrequent lighting changes and (a pair of gorgeous gowns excepted) deliberately low-rent costumes - and the script and characters aren't enchanting enough to survive without fairy-tale cosmetics. (Although less than half of

The Ugly Duckling

's opening-day audience would have fit there, the show would have benefited from being performed in Circa '21's sister venue, ComedySportz.)

Even if *The Ugly Duckling* were being performed at *Disneyland*, though, the material probably wouldn't have played, as the script is exposition-heavy, carelessly plotted, and criminally short on jokes. (The two times I chuckled were at moments most likely not in the original script, when Brad Hauskins' off-stage bird-hunter, trailing our heroine, sang the opening lyric of the Carpenters' "Close to You" - think about it - and when Horvath's omnipotent narrator foiled that hunter with a Jedi mind trick.) I'm not sure what Walljasper could have done to enliven the proceedings here, but even the interaction with the kids is feeble: At one point, the production's

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Swan Queen (Jenny Stodd) has the crowd raise their arms and imitate trees - a fine touch, as youngsters always enjoy a little audience participation. But 20 minutes later, the Queen returns, has the kids do it *again*, and then realizes that there was actually no *reason* for this arms-in-the-air shtick - her mistake. (Was she just checking to see if we were still *awake*?) Goofy is one thing; *The Ugly Duckling*, at times, is just plain *bizarre*.

Too bad, because in the title role, Liz Coyne is doing some lovely work. Her honking, nasal voice is just right at the start, and by subtly changing her timbre and posture as the show progresses, this inventive, endearing actress effortlessly morphs into a graceful swan. Coyne is easily the best reason to see *The Ugly Duckling*; it's a shame that her character has nothing to do but be adorable. Horvath, sadly, has even *le* *ss* to do - he's costumed in camouflage to make the narrator blend into the scenery, which the character does all *too* well - and Hauskins, Stodd, and Wayne Hess, portraying the duckling's turkey pal, all look vaguely embarrassed about being there.

I was, too. At the end of *The Ugly Duckling*, the friend I was sitting with asked a young man at a nearby table - who couldn't have been a day over two - if he liked the show; instead of answering, he simply stared at her, open-mouthed. Granted, he may not have known how to *talk* yet, but had *I* been asked, I may have responded exactly the same way.

For tickets, call (309)786-7733 extension 2.