Written by Mike Schulz
Wednesday, 06 December 2006 02:29

This past Saturday, I had the unique opportunity to catch *two* local theatrical productions: St. Ambrose University's *Narnia* (an hour-long stage version of C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch, & the Wardrobe*) and the Quad City Music Guild's presentation of *It's a Wonderful Life: The Musical* . (Both closed on Sunday, December 3.)

Despite obvious differences in subject matter and audience demographic - *Narnia* was geared toward the 10-and-under set, while *Wonderful Life* was designed for ... well, pretty much everyone *else* - the shows did bear a striking similarity, in that both were musical adaptations of decidedly *un* -musical works with enormous fan bases; St. Ambrose and Music Guild could probably have secured full houses based on the titles alone.

By the productions' curtain calls, though, they shared something else: Audiences may have entered with fond feelings for the musicals' source material, but I'm guessing they left with appreciation for other elements entirely.

In the case of *Narnia*, that would be the grand spectacle of the thing. As directed by Michael Kennedy, *Narnia* was a glorious visual treat, as evidenced by the awed rumblings of the kids (and more than a few adults) in attendance. Brad Frazee's superior lighting effects, with swirling colors and images engulfing the Galvin Fine Arts Center, were less show-offy than *honestly* magical, and Kristofer Eitrheim

designed beautifully functional sets that were also, in and of themselves, beautiful. (The frequent scene shifts were handled spectacularly well - no uncomfortable pauses whatsoever.)

And Dianne Dye's costumes quite simply stole the show. Whenever a new character entered the scene, you could hear the audience taking a moment to marvel at Dye's latest, inspired creation, usually with a slight intake of breath followed by a giggle; they (and I) adored the first sight of the White Witch (Emily Kurash), and Mr. Tumnus (Adam Burnham), and by the time Mr. and Mrs. Beaver (Joseph Feldman and Jaci Entwisle) showed up - the missus wearing hilarious, oversize bunny slippers - the kids were so audibly delighted you'd think Santa himself had arrived. And then Santa arrived. (Dan Hernandez's character here was actually called Father Christmas, but that didn't stop more than one tyke from greeting his appearance with an ecstatic "*Santa*!")

By contrast, the children in the *It's a Wonderful Life* audience appeared to watch Music Guild's production with rapt attention. We *all* did. The level of difficulty in bringing the Narnian universe to stage life is considerable, but I'm not sure it matches the challenge of breathing new life into a story that most of us probably know far *too* well; familiarity with Frank Capra's movie may bring audiences to the theatre, but good luck getting us to *stop* thinking of the movie during its performance. Based on the enthusiastic - and more than deserved - standing ovation that greeted Music Guild's curtain call, however, I doubt that any of us still had Capra on the brain. The crowd may have attended the show already loving *It's a Wonderful Life*, but quickly enough, it was clear that what we were loving was this *particular It's a Wonderful Life.*

When actors are flooding their roles with personality and passion - and when the audience is alert to their presence - there's an electric charge in the theatre that you can just *feel*, and under the superb direction of Kevin Pieper, the *Wonderful Life* cast never let memories of the movie do their work for them; the characters were brimming with such original flourishes, and such humanity, that is was almost as if Capra's film never *existed*.

The crowd rightfully adored Harold Truitt's cheerful, nimble turn as Clarence, and Todd Weber's

(literal) baggy-pants comedy as the inebriated Uncle Billy, and Andy Davis' pungent meanness as Mr. Potter. And enough can't possibly be said about Mike Millar's performance as George. The actor didn't channel Jimmy Stewart so much as completely capture Stewart's *soulfulness*; Millar's achingly honest work - funny, ardent, and incredibly touching - was nearly breathtaking.

But the great joy of attending this *Wonderful Life* was that the audience was alive to so *many* performers, whether or not they appeared in iconic roles. You could sense their happiness every time Stephanie Perry's Violet entered the scene; playing Bedford Falls' good bad girl, Perry's warmth and sass were dazzling. The strength and professionalism of John Donald O'Shea commanded - and earned - respect, and Dolores Sierra and Jan Golz had enormous audience empathy; you were grateful for every minute of their stage time. And when Greg Golz and Jane Schmidt, portraying Mr. and Mrs. Martini, burst into a parodistic take on "O Sole Mio," the crowd's giddiness was overwhelming - you'd think we were all five years old and Santa (or Father Christmas) had just popped on-stage.

Both *Narnia* and *It's a Wonderful Life: The Musical* would have been considered successes merely by giving audiences what they expected from them. What a heartening thrill to see both giving audiences so much *more*.