

Written by Mike Schulz

Wednesday, 06 December 2006 02:31

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I'm good friends with more than a few actors who frequently perform at the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse, and I'm occasionally asked if my ties to them - and to the venue itself - skew my opinions about Circa '21 productions. I'd like to think they don't ... but then I'll be confronted with a production such as *The Elves & the Shoemaker*. I had a blast at the theatre's new family musical, yet I'm forced to address a nagging issue: Did I enjoy it because it's *good*

, or did I enjoy it because the act of watching my pals doing goofy-ass shtick in goofy-ass costumes makes me unaccountably happy?

Surely, the appeal doesn't derive from the work *itself*. With a book by Karen Boettcher-Tate and music and lyrics by Larry Nestor, the show follows the "Shoemaker & the Elves" fable pretty faithfully. And that's the problem. This wispy tale, with its repetitive action and simple moral - be nice to people and they'll be nice in return - just doesn't have enough heft to sustain interest over two acts (even two really *short* acts).

The dialogue is occasionally amusing and the songs, though they exist mostly to mark time, are peppy, but there isn't much going on here, and a few details are just plain weird; though they appear on stage several times beforehand, the elves finally get their introductory song in Act

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, and the joyous happy ending consists of our characters celebrating ... the incipient arrival of a *shoe factory*

. (Hooray.

*More*

childlike laborers can toil for no financial gain.)

*The Elves & the Shoemaker*

isn't bad. It just isn't very satisfying.

But, man, are the talents behind Circa '21's production working overtime to keep audiences from noticing! In their boldly colorful, storybook way, Gregory Hiatt's costumes rival his detailed creations for *Irving Berlin's White Christmas*, and the Broadway-razzmatazz lighting, by Justin Charles Gebhardt, is practically a show in itself - all that's missing is Grizabella's "Memory" and a big floating tire. Director Michael Oberfield disguises

*Elves*

' lack of substance through flash and spectacle; the actors' contributions, meanwhile, are spectacles of a different sort, and this is where - in trying to explain my enthusiasm - things get dicey.

For instance, do you have to *know* Brad Hauskins - who plays an excitable elf named Schwartz - to glean why his character's fey insistence on making " *ladies'*

shoes!" is so funny? Do you need prior knowledge of Janos Horvath's

*Simpsons*

adoration to enjoy his perfect approximation of Homer's heart attack? Is the sight of Rick Davis barking out orders to his underlings only hilarious if you're aware of the actor's day job? (He's Circa '21's operations manager.)

Maybe. But considering the delighted responses of the kids *and* adults in the audience last Thursday, I'm guessing that the inside gags merely

*heighten*

the amusement rather than substitute for it.

*Elves*

' cast members appear to be doing a fine job of keeping themselves - and those of us on their wavelength - entertained, but they're not ignoring the ones the entertainment is

*primarily*

meant for.

The youths' most vocal reactions came from the antics of the elves, and their first cackling

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entrance - racing amongst the audience on their way to the stage - sets up their characters rather effectively; they're boisterous, and bizarre, and not all there. The comic energy of the actors playing these long-underwear-clad pixies (Davis, Hauskins, Paris Bradstreet, Bret Churchill, and Jenna Kantor) is admirable, especially since, despite the elves' billing in the title, they really don't have much to do. (Kim Furness, in lovely voice as the story's plot-goosing enchantress, has even *less* to do.) But while the quintet's hyperactivity is fun, that enjoyment is secondary to the fun you get from the show's ostensibly "normal" adult figures.

As the shoemaker and his wife, Horvath and Erin Churchill (nee Dickerson) are a dream of a comic match. Horvath's fussy little nebbish perfectly complements Churchill's overwhelmed hausfrau - with a thick-as-molasses Minnesota accent - and the two are so busily, sweetly in character that you often giggle even when they have nothing funny to say or do. (One caveat: The couples' oft-repeated kissy-face routine is cute and all, but Oberfield might have given it a rest after, say, the first nine or 10 times.) Andrea Moore, as the villainous Sneerella Twerm - *great*

kids' show name - manages to suggest Margaret Hamilton cast as *Annie*

's Miss Hannigan; entering a room with ennui-laced hatefulness, she addresses the merriment with, "Do I hear ...

*happiness*

in here ... ?" And Jenna Kantor is haughtily imperious as a diva ballerina; I adored her comedic Russian accent until she began singing "Le Poisson" from

*The Little Mermaid*

, when I realized the character was supposed to be French. Either way, it was hysterical.

Paris Bradstreet, as the flamboyant Ms. Snootbottom (she wears a painter's palette for a hat), is a divinely high-comic riot, and as the town mayor, Rick Davis shows up again, puts the show in his breast pocket, and walks off with it. Does Davis do something wildly original with the role? Not really. He does a Paul Lynde impression - and in this context, his uproarious Lynde channeling knocks the production into a higher realm of schizoid nuttiness; Davis shows up and, all of a sudden, a killer Paul Lynde imitation seems to be *exactly* what the show needs. On Thursday, the adults among us went nuts.

You may ask: Why Paul Lynde? (Friends who were there tell me of Davis' *Elves* audition, when he played the mayor as Christopher Walken. Cross your fingers for a sequel.) For that matter, why Minnesota? Why France? (Or Russia?) Why "Hey! You! Get offa my cloud!"? I have no idea. But curlicues such as these made me chuckle - a

*lot*

- regardless.

*The Elves & the Shoemaker*

**Sole Patrol: "The Elves & the Shoemaker," at the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse through December 26**

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may seem like a game of inside baseball, but it's one that *everyone* should be delighted to participate in.

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