

## I'd Walk a Million Miles for One of Your Smiles: "Thoroughly Modern Millie" at Quad City Music Guild

Written by Mike Schulz

Wednesday, 13 June 2007 02:42

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At Thursday's preview performance of Quad City Music Guild's *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, I seated myself in the third-to-last row of the Prospect Park theatre, yet even at that distance, I found myself distracted by an intense, nearly blinding illumination shining from center stage. It turns out, though, that this wasn't any kind of technical glitch; it was just Melissa Anderson Clark grinning at us.

Clark plays the title character in director Bob Williams' charmingly goofy, roaring-'20s satire, and from first scene to last, exudes an infectious, irrepressible happiness; it's barely an exaggeration to say that her smile lights up the stage. Yet the performer is far more than a merry ingénue here: She's a musical-comedy *powerhouse*. Clark's vocals are strong, clear, and wonderfully enthusiastic, and she's as funny as she is feisty; Millie's hilariously inept attempt at seducing her employer, "sexily" elongating herself on a chair until she falls on her ass, is the kind of perfectly-timed slapstick that deserves - and, on Thursday,

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*received* -  
hearty applause.

If Clark is the best reason to see *Millie*, the character's boss is the second-best. Kevin Pieper plays the dimly self-infatuated Trevor Graydon, and the actor vigorously stomps off with his every minute of stage time. Pieper's drunken anguish, when Graydon's disheveled administrator finds himself stood up, is hilarious, but even better is his "Speed Test" number; the actor performs this gloriously tongue-tying, Gilbert & Sullivan-esque routine with sensational brio. Clark and Pieper continually reaffirm just how intoxicating musical theatre can be when performed with gusto and absolute confidence.

I wish the production had displayed even more *of it*.



It's entirely possible that *Millie's* highs are so high that they make its lows seem lower than they actually are. But while Barb Millar's and Sue Woodard's costumes are beautifully designed, and Kathy Schutter's choreography is fantastically energetic, too many of those

*wearing*

the costumes and

*performing*

the dance routines appear all but swallowed by them. With few exceptions, the ensemble members aren't providing the necessary pop; they're letting the wardrobe and choreography

pop

*for*

them.

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This isn't to say that the group isn't pulling off Schutter's impressive moves, or that their harmonies - accompanied by a thrillingly fine orchestra - are anything less than top-tier. But I'll again bring up a recurring complaint: Considering how many performers routinely fill out Music Guild casts (*Millie's* features more than two dozen), when the ensemble members don't appear to be having fun, we *notice*. The ensemble's uncommitted expressions here oftentimes suck the energy out of the show's big production numbers, and unfortunately, this lethargy also extends to a few of *Millie's* prominent supporting figures.

Mary Bouljon's performance as demented former thespian Mrs. Meers begins spectacularly, with her feather-light, Chinese-stereotype readings a source of laugh-out-loud pleasure. Yet Bouljon doesn't develop a satisfying rhythm - the scenes where Mrs. Meers attempts to communicate with her hapless assistants, especially, are suffused with deadly, momentum-crushing pauses - and the actress never hits the maniacally over-the-top heights you hope for. Bouljon seems like a very nice lady playing a very mean lady, and you'd have an easier time believing the act if the actress *herself* appeared to believe it.



Wendy Czekalski, meanwhile, is given a confusing introduction as chanteuse Muzzy Van Hossmere and doesn't find much to play beyond generic haughtiness, and while Joel Kolander reveals a marvelous tenor as *Millie's* romantic foil, Jimmy, his ultra-low-key demeanor when *not* singing grows a little monotonous. (The actor's unflappability is right for a seen-it-all New Yorker, but doesn't do much for an audience.)

Thankfully, several performers come close to matching the energy of Clark and Pieper, and help *Millie* override its occasional lulls. Erika Thomas lets loose with a dynamic soprano - her blushing, prissy Miss Dorothy grows steadily funnier as the show progresses - and Pami

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Triebel's comic aggressiveness, scaring Jimmy off with hysterical grit, left the audience cheering. Christopher Thomas and John Weigandt, as Mrs. Meers' aides, are a dream of a musical-comedy team, with their Chinese rendition of "Mammy" (with accompanying English subtitles) a particular hoot.

And for about 15 seconds, ensemble member Heather Pieper steals the show away from *all* of them. Her untimely entrance disrupting one of Mrs. Meers' schemes, Pieper's boarding-house denizen struts on stage, delivers a torrent of breathless Noo Yawk banter, giggles, walks into her room, slams the door, and leaves the audience wishing desperately that we could

*follow*

her there. The role is basically a walk-on, no larger than any of the ensemble's, but if everyone here suggested Pieper's exuberance - the audience's applause practically lasted longer than Pieper's

*scene*

- one can only imagine the fireworks this

*Thoroughly Modern Millie*

might've set off.

*For tickets, call (309) 762-6610.*