

Written by Mike Schulz

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You might think it odd that, for its penultimate summer production, the Timber Lake Playhouse is staging *Irving Berlin's White Christmas*, thereby celebrating the holiday season a good two or three months before the malls will. But the actual presentation turns out to be stranger still. Not only are you getting *White Christmas* here, you're getting three or four *different White Christmas* es; the results aren't bad, necessarily, but the show winds up feeling a bit like the Bing Crosby classic as co-directed by Michael Curtiz, Tommy Tune, and Rip Taylor.

For an understanding of this *White Christmas* experience, you need look no further than its performance(s) by Jeremy Day. This season, Day has been an extraordinary asset to Timber Lake. Blazingly funny in *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*, haunted and moving in *Dracula*, and dryly hysterical in *Bat Boy the Musical* and *Funny Money*, he's that rare performer who fits into an ensemble effortlessly yet can easily be a one-man

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show. At this point, Day appears capable of anything, and a good thing, too, as

*White Christmas*

- to its credit and occasional detriment - pretty much requires that he do *everything*

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As the beloved General Waverly, who inspires Bing and Danny ... er, Bob and Phil (Tanner Bollinger and Zack Powell) ... to perform their climactic Christmas revue, Day opens the show on an unexpectedly somber note, choking back tears as he thanks the troops for their dedication and sacrifice, and - without stooping to melodrama - making war-minded 1944 feel as real, as *relevant*, as war-minded 2007. It's a stunning, poignant prelude for a musical comedy, and thanks to Day's sincerity, audiences familiar with the *White Christmas*

material can already imagine the emotional payoffs to come.

However, when we next see Day some 15 minutes later, he's no longer the general, but (as listed in the program) "Snoring Man," who performs some broad shtick - and a full-throttle verse of the song "Snow" - on a train to Vermont. The actor pulls this minor role off with great enthusiasm, but the character switch is jarring; after his heartfelt work in the opening scene, you don't *want* Day to revert to traditional musical-comedy bonhomie. (Several performers in *White Christmas*

are double-cast, but their roles are tangential enough that it doesn't matter so much.)

The general eventually returns, but the damage has already been done; Day's portrayal, while still touching, now seems more manufactured than it did before. Ironically, the actor's facility winds up working *against* him, and the same thing happens with *White Christmas* as a whole; its tone so freely vacillates between honest sentiment and anything-for-a-laugh insouciance that you're not quite sure

*how*

to take it.

What keeps the production from being a mess - well, *more* of a mess - is that director James Beaudry proves accomplished at whichever tone he chooses. He elicits warm, earnest performances from Bollinger and Jenny Guse (both of whom demonstrate superior vocal gifts), and his handling of young Abby Pauley, as the general's granddaughter, is magnificent; fully focused on the stage action and beautifully naturalistic, Pauley is an absolute charmer. Braxton James Molinaro - a Timber Lake acting intern who I wish appeared in more productions this summer - is charismatic and confident as a fast-talking producer. And Beaudry allows

## Hit and Mistletoe: "Irving Berlin's White Christmas," at the Timber Lake Playhouse through August 5

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Cassandra Marie Nuss (who, like Day, appears almost *fearsomely* talented) to be larger-than-life without being fraudulent; she's comic relief, but *human*, which is a *bigger* relief.

Yet *White Christmas*' truthful moments occur in tandem with touches so *outré* they seem to come from another show entirely. That "Snow" number, with characters magically leaving the confines of the train, is almost parodistically broad, and the Act I finale interrupts a fine rendition of "Blue Skies" for a misguided chase scene that suggests

*White Christmas: The Cartoon*

. As the frazzled stage manager, Jay Reynolds Jr. is awfully funny, but his screaming-queen act distracts from everything around him, and Bob's and Phil's "Sisters" reprise is a real botch; Bollinger's and Powell's lip-synching to prerecorded tracks of Guse and Jacqui Pugh (who portrays a delightfully air-headed, yet canny, Judy Haynes) is a mildly senseless film idea that makes

*no*

sense as a stage idea, and the recording is muddy and badly amplified, to boot.

It should be noted that, while they boasted some lovely voices and spirited choreography (by Beaudry and Hillary Elk), nearly *every* musical number at Saturday night's performance fell victim to atrocious sound problems; the static-filled hiss of the CD tracks frequently overwhelmed the performers' projection. I'm hoping this hindrance has been ironed out by the show's second weekend, because this frequently enjoyable yet ultimately confounding production of

*Irving Berlin's White Christmas* doesn't

need any

*ore*

obstacles to overcome.

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*For tickets, call (815) 244-2035.*