

Play It Again, Irv: "Irving Berlin's White Christmas," at Circa '21 through January 5

Written by Mike Schulz

Wednesday, 14 November 2007 02:27



Among those I spoke with during the show's subsequent opening-night party, the prevailing opinion seemed to be that the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse's new production of *Irving Berlin's White Christmas* was superior to the 2006 production, and I guess that maybe, in several respects, it was.

Certainly, in comparing this year's opening night to last year's, there were fewer glitches. Barring the continual hiss from one actor's body mic and one obviously tardy lighting cue, the technical elements could hardly be faulted, and the scene changes were handled with far greater finesse. Plus, the group musical numbers were more electrifying than they were in *White Christmas* ' previous incarnation, and they were damned good *then* ; the show's second ditty is titled "Let Yourself Go," and all throughout the production, the ensemble members - boasting mad tap skills, gorgeous vocals, and beaming smiles across the board - did exactly that.

Circa '21's latest is polished and engaging, and two performers new to the show, Kent M. Lewis and Amy Decker as the Bing Crosby and Rosemary Clooney surrogates, appear positively loaded with talent. Yet I can't quite muster the same level of enthusiasm that I did for last year's *White Christmas* , and it's partly due to my familiarity - which is, by now, an *over* -familiarity - with the material.

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Including the Timber Lake Playhouse's July presentation, I've now seen three stage productions of *White Christmas* in 366 days, and I'm a little disheartened to say that its considerable charms are starting to wear thin.

I'm noticing more and more that the complications keeping the leading lovers apart are mild even for the traditionally lighthearted realm of musical comedy, which dulls our interest in the narrative. (Bob and Betty seem irrationally pissed at each other even before the script gives them proper *reason* to be.)



And, put simply, there's just too much filler. The musical numbers - particularly the group numbers - are splendid, but there's a lot of down time between them, and the endearingly cornball jokes and wisecracking show-biz banter begin to feel hollow when not tempered by scenes of honest sentiment and emotion.

Honest sentiment and emotion, however, always seem to be kept at bay here, which is why I don't think my previous *White Christmas* visits are *wholly* to blame for my moderate disenchantment. Directed and choreographed - as was last year's production - by Ann Nieman, the show is a frequently spectacular visual and aural experience. (Greg Hiatt's ravishingly inspired costumes practically qualify as special effects.) What it isn't, though, is a touching one, in large part because Michael C. Schmidt, as General Henry Waverly, doesn't appear to be in the same show as his co-stars.

Waverly is the linchpin to the entire plot, as nearly all of *White Christmas*' heart-tugging elements derive from other characters' efforts in keeping his Vermont inn open, and the scenes

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in which the general comforts his granddaughter or addresses his troops have built-in poignancy. Yet Schmidt, who is a very presentational actor, plays the role so broadly (even more so than last year) that the poignancy is eradicated, and even his comedic retorts and reactions are only a degree removed from complete cartoonishness; his open-mouthed offense at a moderately bawdy gag delivered by Autumn O'Ryan's Martha almost kills her spot-on delivery of it. (Schmidt doesn't perform double takes; he performs triple and quadruple takes.) The actor's growl and bark in his opening scene were impressive. I just didn't buy him when he *wasn't* barking.

Consequently, there isn't much emotional stake in the production, and its heart seems to be absent in other places, besides; Betty's Act II number "Love, You Didn't Do Right by Me" is meant to illuminate the character's romantic misery, but Amy Decker's passionate, full-throttle interpretation is such a rafter-shaker that the *reason* Betty is singing that particular song gets lost - it sounds as if she can get along without Bob just *fine*.

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Getting huffy about such a powerful rendition, though, would be the height of ridiculousness (even if it doesn't really work contextually). And that number by Decker - who, throughout the production, provides both a stunning voice and saucy comic directness - actually underscores the spirit that makes this *White Christmas* such a frequent delight: Even if you can't necessarily convince 'em, you can certainly *wow* 'em.

It would seem impossible to experience group numbers such as "Snow," the tap spectacular "I

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"Love a Piano," and the beautifully arranged title song without grinning. But several solos and duets provide similar electricity; O'Ryan lets loose with a fabulous Merman belt on "Let Me Sing & I'm Happy" - on Friday, in a role double-cast with Hannah Solchenberger, sixth grader Ashley Lewis performed a charming version of the song as well - and Gabriel Beck and the eternally vibrant Erin Churchill (nee Dickerson, and blessedly returning to her role as Judy) trip the light fan-freaking-tastic on "The Best Things Happen While You're Dancing."

Those eccentric comedians Tom Walljasper, Adam Michael Lewis, and Don Hepner steal a moment here and there, Andrea Moore and Megan Rosenblatt shriek and shimmy with gusto, and enough can't be said about the superbly well-choreographed Act I finale, "Blue Skies," or about Kent M. Lewis' joyous, insinuatingly inviting performance of it. Smartly, the performer never tries to replicate Bing Crosby in this production, and creates a distinctive presence through sheer versatility: He's a nutty, energetic clown in "Happy Holiday," a romantic ideal in "Love & the Weather," and - best of all - a jazzy show-stopper in "Blue Skies." I have no idea what show Circa '21 has in mind for *next* Christmas, but if the theatre would like to take a year off from *Irving Berlin's White Christmas* and, as an alternative, secure Nieman, Lewis, and company for a Bob Fosse extravaganza, you won't hear *me* complain.

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