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About a half hour into Augustana College's opening-night presentation of the deservedly beloved musical romance *The Fantasticks*, Brian Bengtson made his first appearance as the aging ham Henry, and I can't recall the last time I was so *relieved* to see an actor on stage.

It's not that there weren't pleasures to be had prior to the performer's arrival, among them some nice stylistic flourishes (I particularly liked the colored confetti that represented shorn foliage) and the terrific on-stage playing of musicians Gail Baldwin and Ruth Symons. But beginning with his unexpected entrance and continuing through his flamboyant Act I exit, Bengtson is thrillingly confident, wildly imaginative, and thoroughly ingratiating - everything, I'm sorry to say, that *The Fantasticks* itself *isn't*.

Director Mark Hurty's production doesn't fail in big ways so much as it fails in lots of small ways, usually by setting up high expectations and then quashing them. Take, for instance, the show's central romance, between 20-year-old Matt (Kevin Wender) and his 16-year-old next-door neighbor, Luisa (Amy Keipert). We're first introduced to the girl in a wonderfully goofy cascade of thoughts that establishes Luisa's charming self-centeredness and unbridled romanticism, and Keipert, babbling with delightful guilelessness, lends the role a burst of wide-eyed, eccentric vitality.

Unfortunately, though, it's vitality in a vacuum, because Wender - so funny in Augustana's recent *Taming of the Shrew* - isn't playing at Keipert's level. Frankly, it's hard to tell what level he's playing *at*. The actor seems oddly disconnected from his material, and even more disconnected from Luisa; you never feel that there's anything at stake in the duo's relationship because Wender's generic male lover isn't convincing as a worthy object of Luisa's manic affection. The pair's declarations of love, and their eventual hostilities, feel weightless; for characters that have grown up together, the actors themselves seem barely to have been introduced.

Yet the lack of a satisfying romance is just one of several sizable disappointments here. Hurty's directorial conceit finds the show being performed in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park circa 1967, and at first, the casting of Jessica Benson and Sara Potts as the lovers' frequently warring fathers seems inspired, as it underscores the presentational play-acting behind Hurty's concept. But as soon as the performers begin singing, the drag act collapses; Benson's and Potts' airy sopranos don't in any way match the "manly" delivery of their dialogue, and aren't employed ironically, either - you end up wondering why Hurty didn't just have his actresses play *mothers*

, as allowing them to play their own gender might have loosened up the actresses' readings. (On Friday, the pair briefly broke character after goofing up a secret handshake, and their mutual giggle was their most relaxed, enjoyable moment in the show.) Like Wender, Benson and Potts frequently look unsure of what's expected of them and left to their own devices, and this appears to be the case even among those whose portrayals aren't so ill-defined.

As the roguish bandit El Gallo, Ben Webb gives a smooth, assured performance, but he's so unflappably deadpan - even during his comedic (yet repetitive) dance in "It Depends on What You Pay" - that he eventually blends into the background; you don't remember much more than his great look, his pleasant baritone, and his arched eyebrow. The gifted Kyle Roggenbuck, portraying a traveling actor with a penchant for death scenes, vanishes even further - her mortally wounded routines appear only half-directed - and while Katie McCarthy does lovely, amusing work as *The Fantasticks'* mime, she, too, seems to be an afterthought; her most entertaining bits come when the audience isn't meant to focus on her. (I was grateful for McCarthy's presence, though, as she gave me someone else to watch when the actors

Paradise Lost: "The Fantasticks," at Augustana College through February 17

Written by Mike Schulz

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occasionally sang

seriously off-pitch.)

I wondered why more attention wasn't paid to McCarthy's reactions, but then again, I wondered "Why?" throughout *much* of the show. Why were some two-dozen chairs positioned around the stage when the production wasn't being performed in the round? Why did characters frequently make crosses behind the playing area as opposed to in front of it? And why oh why did Matt's climactic loss of innocence have to be equated with *America's* loss of innocence, with the dark shadow of Vietnam hovering over his return to Luisa? Lending the material a larger historical context obliterates its tender, small-scale appeal, and isn't *The Fantasticks* metaphorical enough without making it allegorical, as well?

And yet somehow, through all of this, Brian Bengtson manages to triumph. Displaying frighteningly strong comic timing, the actor makes his every exaggerated recitation a source of laugh-out-loud hilarity; he alone seems to know exactly the effects he's meant to pull off in Augustana's *The Fantasticks*, and you can feel a happy electricity circulating in the audience whenever he's on stage. Ever since Bengtson's freshman performance in 2005's *The Laramie Project*, I've been in thrall to his talent; given the gloom and foul weather of the recent winter months, the actor's impending graduation is the only thing making me dread the spring.

For tickets, call (309) 794-7306.