

Written by Mike Schulz
Thursday, 03 April 2008 01:57



If you peruse your program before the Quad City Music Guild's current production of *Once Upon a Mattress*

, you'll see that Joe Urbaitis plays a character named Prince Dauntless the Drab. While watching the actor, it probably won't take long for you to decide that Urbaitis is colossally miscast in the role, as his inventive, fearlessly funny performance in this musical comedy is anything
but
drab.

Based on its April 1 preview performance (and what a perfect opening date for a show about fools!), director Harold Truitt's *Once Upon a Mattress* - a nutty, musical re-imagining of the "Princess & the Pea" fairy tale - will likely have you laughing for a great many (positive) reasons. But I may as well start by praising Urbaitis, as his Dauntless has probably never been chosen first for anything in his life.

There's *Superbad* geek, and there's *Revenge of the Nerds* geek, and then there's Urbaitis' prince, who's the sort of stunted grown-up you want to send to bed with some Graham crackers, a box of milk, and a Ritalin. Dauntless is almost delirious at the prospect of wedding Heather McGonigle's Princess Winnifred the Woebegone, and Urbaitis reveals the character's escalating excitement through every element of his performance; he asks questions with a feverish

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intensity, as though his life depended on their answer, and addresses acquaintances with startlingly aggressive cheer. (When delivering a particularly energetic sentiment, the prince happily spins in a circle.) Urbaitis would be reason alone to see

Once Upon a Mattress

. But his on-stage girlfriend ain't too shabby, either.



I remember McGonigle's Dusty Springfield in last season's *Beehive* feeling (and sounding) effortless. I'm happy to report that this feeling extends to her comedic sense. (And even her *belting*

here sounds effortless.) You occasionally catch the actress trying too hard, as her takes to the audience, like those of her co-stars, are a little forced. But playing the earthbound - or rather, *swamp*

-bound - Winnifred, whom Dauntless romantically calls "Fred," McGonigle is wonderfully commanding, especially during her more overtly physical bits; the actress' annoyed abandon when her character is sitting atop 20 comfy mattress and a pea shows an inventive, active comic mind at work. She's even funnier with a partner, and as star-crossed mismatches go, McGonigle's princess and Urbaitis' prince make sensationally goofy music together.

Lord, how I wish the show's timing were better! The April 1 presentation was still technically a dress rehearsal, so I'm hoping that Truitt subsequently fixed some of the nagging pauses in the production, because they really kept this *One Upon a Mattress* from displaying the comic and musical momentum it needed to have. Too many scenes were poky and halting - particularly

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those involving Greg Golz's mute king, John Weigandt's minstrel, and Derek Bertelsen's jester - and the timing on the song segues needed to be far tighter. (I have a friend who hates musicals because of that dreaded five-second pause after a song cue, where the actors are given nothing to do but stare at each other until it's finally time to sing. He wouldn't have enjoyed this show.)



Yet aside from being annoyed by lapses in tempo (not for nothing, but a couple of exchanges in Act II could just as easily have been presented through a lighting change, rather than a full-fledged, pace-killing "lights up, lights down" scene shift), I had a terrific time at *Once Upon a Mattress*

The costumes designed by Aimee Kass - which looked exceptional upon Truitt's impressive, storybook set design - were magnificently colorful (and often hilarious), and special props must also go to Pami Triebel's props; Triebel and her team earned more than their share of laughs with the sight of a dead possum, an intimidating set of barbells, an oversized hourglass, and an even more oversized nightingale cage, occupied by the lovely dancer Amber Vick.

Plus, in addition to *Once Upon a Mattress*' leads, many of the show's supporting performers were in sensational form. Considering (or perhaps because of) the fact that she didn't appear to alter her facial expression even *once*, Valeree Pieper was hysterical as the hypochondriacal Queen Aggravain; her joyously endless Act I monologue made me want to applaud every 20 seconds, but I was afraid of disrupting the actress' exhilaratingly stream-of-consciousness diatribe.

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The ever-sincere, ever-enjoyable Todd Weber seemed to be having a great time as Sir Harry (the actor's crooning - especially on Act II's "Yesterday I Loved You" - has never sounded so passionate), and Katie Casey, as Harry's pregnant intended, was dynamically entertaining. Her singing was marvelous, but better still was Casey's comedic enthusiasm, as she seemed wholly unconcerned about embracing the character of Lady Larkin's inherent, explosive silliness; the actress' shrieking of "Libertine!" at Harry felt like the zenith in profanity. (For his part, veteran area actor John Donald O'Shea was predictably enjoyable as the Wizard, and after seeing him in numerous production over the years, *Mattress* finally underscored the reason *why* - his every reading sounds like Jimmy Durante's laugh.)



Again based on that preview performance, it's hard to gauge what the potential reaction from subsequent *Once Upon a Mattress* attendees will be like, as the April 1 audience only encompassed some two dozen of us (one-sixth of whom were there to *review*

the thing). But I'm hoping, and expecting, that they'll be similarly enchanted by the ensemble's impressive vocals - aided by some canny sound work by Mark McGinn, the ladies' harmonies in Act I's "Swamps of Home" number were particularly delightful - and the go-for-broke leading performances, and the festive sense of *fun*

that emanates through the entire production.

Prince Charming. Princess, Too.: "Once Upon a Mattress" at the Prospect Park Auditorium thru April 6

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In the show's opening ten minutes, Abbey Donohoe appears as a princess in line for Dauntless' hand in marriage, and Pieper's wicked queen promptly boots her out of contention. Any Music Guild production that casts the best thing in its winter production of *Miracle on 34th Street* as someone to be immediately gotten rid of is displaying considerable confidence. In

Once Upon a Mattress,
it's confidence well-earned.

For tickets, call (309)762-6610.