

Written by Mike Schulz

Wednesday, 04 June 2008 02:45

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When he took the stage before Thursday night's presentation of *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, the Clinton Area Showboat Theatre's producing artistic director - and *Millie* director - Craig A. Miller mentioned that audiences might notice a couple of changes at the 'Boat this year.

Instead of the usual lineup of five shows, each running two weekends, the 2008 season would feature four shows running three weekends; this was designed, we were told, to give the Showboat's participants a bit of a breather within the typically relentless summer-stock schedule, and to give the productions another week to benefit from the type of enthusiastic reviews that greeted last year's offerings. (Oh great, I thought. *Expectations.*)

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The other major change was that even though the four shows would, as in the past, be debuting on Thursdays, their *official* opening nights were being switched to Fridays - a more convenient evening for audiences to stick around for the traditional post-show meet-and-greet with the cast. It's hard to argue with that logic - I, too, have to get up early on Friday mornings - and I'm glad that Miller made the announcement, because while Thursday's *Thoroughly Modern Millie* ended up being quite charming, and featured outstanding costuming by Sonia Elizabeth Lerner, much of its first act suggested little more than a moderately successful, somewhat hesitant dress rehearsal.

Like most rehearsals, Thursday's presentation had its share of gaffes. A hat and a string of pearls were lost during two separate dance numbers; a door that refused to open led to some uncomfortable pauses (plus a sharp ad lib by Monica Bradley); one mistimed lighting cue left actors in the dark and another neutered the punchline to the zippy "Nutty Cracker Suite" routine; Millie's introductory song found the actress (Alison Luff), for a stretch of time, rushing ahead of the music; Millie's boss' introductory song found the actor (Joshua Estrada) briefly tripping over his lyrics. (Admittedly, the song in question - "The Speed Test" - is a real tongue-twister.) Goofs happen, though, and *Millie's* cast soldiered on without looking rattled.

During the show's first act, though, too many performers looked like they weren't feeling much of *anything*, except maybe apprehension. Luff's roaring-'20s spitfire entered the scene with plenty of gumption and gusto, and the actress sang - in a pitch-perfect approximation of Sutton Foster's Broadway vocals - and spat out wisecracks with considerable brio. But there was such a noticeable uneasiness behind the frozen half-smiles of most of her co-stars that oftentimes, in the group numbers, nothing captured your attention *but* Luff; the ensemble members danced well (especially when tapping) and sang serviceably, yet few of them appeared to be having the sort of freewheeling, contagious fun that this gloriously goofy musical demands.

There were exceptions. As one of Millie's boarding-house allies, Meghan Hakes - who also contributes expert choreography - boasted a terrific dry wit, and Simone Renault's honking Noo Yawker was intoxicatingly funny. (Though, after her unforgettable turn in 2005's *Ruthless*, I continue to wait in vain for Renault's next leading role at the Showboat.) Mikeitta Williams' chanteuse Muzzy Van Hossmere delivered impassioned, soulful vocals and spectacularly underplayed throwaway quips. And best of all was Dallas Milholland in one of modern musical theatre's most enjoyable character roles; the performer's former-actress-turned-kidnapper Mrs. Meers, with her hysterical,

*faux*

-Asian phraseology and absolute comedic fearlessness, was never around as often as you'd

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hoped.

But even Milholland was occasionally forced to do more work than should've been necessary. Mrs. Meers' unwitting assistants were played by Nick Divarco and Mitchell Grego, and while both were likable enough, their intentional deadpans were *too* dead; during an unnecessarily protracted scene in which Milholland gave the pair instructions, the actors looked at her with a blasé indifference that felt like boredom, and the actress had nothing to play off. (During this scene, the birds heard chirping outside the Showboat sounded vaguely like crickets.) Luff, meanwhile, is partnered with Zachary Borja for much of the show's length, and while the young actor has many skills - you can sense the delight he takes in his solos - playing the romantic lead in a musical, at least this

*particular*

musical, isn't yet among them; he's a bit lightweight even for a helium-filled diversion like *Thoroughly Modern Millie*

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Happily, though, the show becomes more deliriously ridiculous as it progresses, and on Thursday, Act II began to find some of the magic that had eluded it in Act I. As the actors loosened up, the company's smiles relaxed, the already-impressive performers grew to be *wonderfully*

impressive, and those who made only modest impressions beforehand seemed to find newfound comic vigor. (Bradley layers her ditzzy Miss Dorothy with welcome, unexpected bursts of sauciness, and Estrada's Trevor Graydon is riotous when the depth of his passion twists his body into a knot.) By its finale, the Showboat's

*Thoroughly Modern Millie*

won me over, and I'll gladly accept Thursday's show as the last rehearsal before the cast began to really sell it, now that, after receiving a spirited standing ovation, they know just how good it *can* be.

*For tickets, call (563) 242-6760.*