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If you can't pull off grandeur in a show that's pretty much *known* for grandeur, you're much better off shooting for ingenuity and invention. So, for those curious how the modestly scaled Clinton Area Showboat Theatre was going to house the extravagantly scaled *Joseph & the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, the happy answer is: with considerable wit and smarts, thank you.

Despite boasting one of the less intimidating running lengths in the musical-theatre canon - including intermission, Friday night's *Joseph* ran a tidy 100 minutes - composer Andrew Lloyd Webber's and lyricist Tim Rice's Biblical re-telling is actually quite massive in scope, as most audiences are no doubt aware. (Certainly, the Showboat is presuming a degree of familiarity with the piece; despite a thorough search, I couldn't find the names of Webber or Rice listed anywhere in the program.) Beyond the frequent locale changes, exuberant dance routines, and musical numbers that incorporate pop, country-and-western, calypso, '50s-style rock, and Broadway-belter ballads, the show's cast of characters includes Joseph, his father, his 11 brothers, their wives, assorted royalty and servants, *and* a children's chorus. Even allowing for double-casting, that's a *lot* of people on the Showboat's relatively intimate stage, and consequently, patrons had every right to wonder just how director/choreographer Patrick Stinson was going to orchestrate this *Joseph* without it becoming an unwieldy, overly crowded mess.

Unsurprisingly, Stinson - a 12-year veteran of the Clinton venue - is way ahead of us, and his handling of the show's diversity, its enormity, and its casting demands is so shrewdly imaginative yet so forehead-slappingly obvious that I can't believe I haven't seen anything like it before. If you'd rather not have the presentational fillips spoiled for you, by all means stop reading now, secure in the knowledge that while this is, in many ways, still the *Joseph* that many of you know so well, it's also unlike any *Joseph* you've ever experienced.

Employing the type of multimedia enhancements also used in his summer productions of *The Last Five Years* and *Singin' in the Rain*, Stinson opens the show with Joseph (Joshua Sohn) aimlessly flipping television channels on a center-stage screen, underscoring Webber's overture with a random, initially disorienting pop-culture montage that includes scenes from *American Idol, Bonanza, American Bandstand, Star Trek,* and *24*. (In an amusing "period" touch on designer Adam Parboosingh's set, Sohn, instead of using a remote, changes stations via what looks like a mammoth sundial.) Our title character then falls asleep, entering a dream world that finds *Joseph*'s musical numbers echoing those programs - "One More Angel in Heaven" performed as a *Bonanza*-inspired hootenanny, "Potiphar" performed aboard the Starship Enterprise, et cetera.

It's a terrifically clever premise, and considering the variety inherent in the show's musical numbers, it makes absolute sense that the staging be imbued with visual and thematic variety to match. (With Webber's songs bouncing from one genre to the next, listening to his score here is very much like listening to the radio and switching stations every five minutes.) Yet as far as the size of its ensemble is concerned, this comically stylized take on *Joseph* has an added benefit, because with that introductory montage preceded with a clip from *Sesame Street*, Stinson is able to fill out his cast - and score a bunch of laughs - through one grin-inducing word: puppets.

That's right: Four of Joseph's 11 brothers are, in fact, made of felt. (Performers Haley Courter and Laurel Decker play characters *married* to characters made of felt.) And with this burst of *Sesame Street*-fueled silliness, plus Nicole Horton enacting the production's sweet-tempered and decidedly maternal Narrator, the overriding sensation of this *Joseph* quickly becomes clear: It's a bedtime story for the TV Land generation.

To be sure, there are times when it's all much too much. With our attention divided between human actors, puppets, and on-screen projections and filmed segments - to say nothing of the moments when the cast performs amidst the audience - you're occasionally put in the position of being overwhelmed by activity, and not necessarily in an *enjoyable* way. (It's not that the

show is unfocused; it just has too much focus in too many different directions.) And partly, I think, because of the attention paid to the visual accoutrements, there's not as much personality on display as you might hope for.

Horton, who's in gorgeous voice throughout, comes off wonderfully well, exuding beguiling friendliness and effervescent naturalism. Yet despite singing the part beautifully, Sohn seems far too passive in what's already a pretty passive role to begin with. (He walks through most of his scenes with a lightly bemused nonchalance that's right for this production's dream-state conception of Joseph, but "lightly bemused" doesn't really do much for an audience.) Stinson himself portrays the show's Elvis-impersonating Pharaoh, gyrating and (especially) crooning with King-ly panache, but still doesn't quite supply the thrillingly confident presence the character demands. Most of Joseph's brothers, meanwhile, are less fun to watch than their felt counterparts, but that's primarily the result of a somewhat odd casting decision, as Drew Simendinger - who is, granted, an exceptional talent - performs the three solos usually divvied up among three performers. As the only brother allowed to command the stage, he's the only brother allowed to show any true vocal or performance range.

Yet there's more than enough that's impressive or inspired or endearingly goofy about this *Joseph & the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*
to handily override its missteps. That
Star Trek
riff - with Dale Hawes doing Shatner, hilariously, and the great Claire Barnhart in green-face - is a hoot, and Sohn's "Close Every Door" number is both sung and staged with haunting effectiveness. Act I's climax, the "Go, Go, Go Joseph" show-stopper, has been brilliantly designed (and is ecstatically performed) as a football skirmish in front of a bleacher-full of fans. And, it should go without saying, there are the puppets. Webber's & Rice's beloved musical is engaging family fare, of course, but after seeing the Showboat's season-closer, I can't be alone in now hankering for a Stinson-helmed take on
Avenue Q
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For tickets and information, call (563)242-6760 or visit ClintonShowboat.org .