

Written by Jill Walsh
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It's been more than 20 years since I read Harry Allard's series of "Miss Nelson" children's books, but it's hard to forget Viola Swamp, "the meanest substitute teacher in the whole world." *Miss Nelson Has a Field Day*

, currently playing at the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse, features Swamp (Liz J. Millea) as the no-nonsense alter-ego of Miss Nelson, the kindly math teacher at Horace B. Smedley Elementary School. The show is as funny as I remember the books being, and judging from the laughter that was constantly erupting from the audience of mostly elementary-school students at Friday's matinee performance, I wasn't the only one who thought so.

Miss Nelson Has a Field Day focuses on three Smedley Tornadoes teammates - Daniel (Brad Hauskins), Kenny (Don Denton), and Patrick (Bret Churchill) - who haven't won a single football game, or even scored a point, during their season. Their well-meaning coach (Janos Horvath) asks them to run a lap during practice, but they prefer to laze around, whining that they'll never win, so why should they bother making an effort? Their attitudes change, though, when Miss Nelson intervenes as Coach Viola, striding onto the field with a black wig on her head, warts on her nose, a scowl on her lips, and a presence that not so much inspires change from her athletes as demands it.



The funniest moments for me - and there were many - were the subtle, clever ones that gave

Kiddie Gridiron: "Miss Nelson Has a Field Day," at the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse through May 8

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the scenes and characters more dimension and likability; the funniest moments for the kids, I believe - based on the intensity of their laughter and their lack of squirminess - were those that included exaggerated physical comedy and the character of Viola Swamp. While I appreciated, for instance, the final tableau with the "Gatorade" (made of orange cloth) being dumped onto the coach's head, the kids got the biggest charge out of the original coach's inability to do a push-up.

Among the cast members, Millea, as the brutish Swamp, was a particular joy to watch as she glared and tromped and shouted across the field. And I found myself smiling when Denton did, well, just about anything. He has a charming, youthful presence that fit his character's vocal range and level of physical engagement perfectly; even when sitting in the background during the song "The History Lesson," he was fumbling with his shirt button and gazing at the singer while his mouth hung open, just like a child's would. (To be honest, his dedication to the role made me feel a bit giddy, and after the show, I nearly lined up to get his autograph on the back of my program, just like the other kids.)



Worth mentioning on the technical side was the strobe light that was used to create the slow-motion action scenes, a nice touch that solved what was no doubt a difficult part to stage by director Kimberly Furness. And Gregory Hiatt's costume designs - particularly Swamp's - were humorously translated from Allard's pages.

Meanwhile, the simple backdrop consisted of a huge black curtain that, unfortunately, toppled over during a scene change, and caused many young audience members to shout, "That's not supposed to happen!" The actors and stage crew quickly made amends, though, and before the remaining scenes were played out in front of the *Church Basement Ladies 2* kitchen set, one of the actors called out to the audience, "Just pretend all this stuff behind me isn't here!" Somehow this snafu - which might've affected me more negatively if I hadn't been surrounded by a bunch of chirpy and easily adaptable kids - seemed appropriate considering

Miss Nelson

's message of perseverance, and there was something unique and particularly endearing about watching three skinny football players doing jumping jacks in front of a 1960s-style refrigerator.

For tickets and information, call (309)786-7733, extension 2, or visit Circa21.com.