

## Rollin' on the River: "Show Boat," at the Clinton Area Showboat Theatre through July 24

Written by Thom White  
Wednesday, 21 July 2010 06:00

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Jennifer Noble is in the wrong role in the Clinton Area Showboat Theatre's production of *Show Boat*

That's to say, she's

so

good in the role of Julie that the part seems woefully small. It is, however, impossible for Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II to write more songs and dialogue for the character, so we must be content to enjoy what we can during Noble's time on stage. And enjoy it I did. Immensely.

Saturday night's performance of the 1927 musical-theatre classic was the most well-attended of any of the shows I've seen at the Showboat so far this summer. Judging by the crowd's reaction, it was as well received as it was attended, which is as it should be. Directed by Patrick Stinson, Showboat's *Show Boat* is well-sung and well-performed, rising above its rather simple story of riverboat actors in love, and their possibly shady pasts.

For her part, Noble manages to mix a touch of moxie into the charm she brings to the role of Julie. With faintly sly looks and inflections, she implies that Julie is a girl who, while polite and poised, possesses a more worldly knowledge. And when she sings... oh, my! "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man" and "Bill" simply aren't long enough. I wanted the performer's teasingly sultry tones to go on and on.

While Noble is notable, Amber Grey is in the lead to be my favorite local performer of the summer, thanks also to her performances in the Showboat's *Rent* and *Noises Off*. Her Queenie is amusingly self-assured - alternating a bright smile and a raised eyebrow - and the actress also has the honor of performing what I think is the show's strongest composition, "Mis'ry's Comin' Aroun'" (a song cut from the original production and not reinstated until 1988). Grey's vocals are so memorably haunting, with their underlying sadness, that

rather than

*Show Boat's*

more popular numbers,

*this*

was the

song she was humming around in my head on the drive home.

Michael Oberfield and Hilary Mullany are well-suited to their roles as Cap'n Andy and Parthy, respectively. Oberfield seems perfectly comfortable and fully alive on the stage, ad-libbing here and there to spice up his role a bit. And Mullany, for her part, is delightfully dry and sharp-tongued. It's a pity her lines are hard to hear at times, as what I *did* hear was remarkably funny in its intentionally humorless delivery.

Bradford Rolan adequately handles the show's most well-known number, "Ol' Man River," but not with quite the full-voiced, rich baritone you'd expect. Nicole Horton is in fine vocal form as

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Magnolia, impressively exuding a naïve joy as a young woman in the first act, and in the second, offering a harsher, more seasoned turn as the older version of that young woman.

Stinson has wisely chosen to tone down *Show Boat's* racial elements for this production, not ignoring the tensions and limitations appropriate to the period, but also not highlighting the period piece's attitudes and epithets. His

*Show Boat*

is sensitive to the subject of race without being pretentious or condescending.

With its choppy, somewhat hard-to-follow advances in time during Act II, I'm still not ready to count *Show Boat* among my favorite musical-theatre classics. I am, however, impressed with how the Clinton Area Showboat Theatre has handled the material.

For tickets and information, call (563)242-6760 or visit [ClintonShowboat.org](http://ClintonShowboat.org).

Thom White covers entertainment news for WQAD Quad Cities News 8.