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On Saturday night, I had the distinct pleasure of taking two very special young ladies - eleven-year-old Hannah and six-year-old Madison - to the theatre, since Countryside Community Theatre's *Annie* seemed the perfect choice to foster their love for live performance. And love it they did, calling the production "awesome" and "really good." As for me, I... didn't exactly love it, but liked it well enough.

The show starts off impressively, revealing the clever functionality of designer Chris Konrady's set. First viewed as the silhouette of a city skyline, the set then spins 180 degrees to reveal bunk beds, and becomes the interior of Annie's orphanage; there's not much that's ornate about the set pieces, but the design itself is so simple, effective, and surprising that it earned whispers of astonishment throughout the audience. It's also the first of many design choices that have a grand effect despite minimal intrusion on the stage. Daddy Warbucks' mansion, for example, is nothing more than a painted backdrop and a staircase, but it has such an imposing effect that it's easy to forget that it's not actually a playing area on which the cast can interact.

Of course, the centerpiece to any production of *Annie* is the actress playing the li'l orphan, and at first, I was disheartened by Haley Wolfe's performance, as it lacked the playful optimism of the Annies I've seen over a handful of stage productions and a couple of film versions. But then it struck me that this is a little girl who's lived her entire life in an orphanage under the care of a verbally and potentially physically abusive woman: Why
would
she have a constant smile on her face? Whether it's due to director Christina Marie Myatt's

guidance or her own acting skills, Wolfe's take on the red-headed character is the most realistic and believable I've yet seen on a stage, and it
remains
believable as Wolfe allows Annie's inner joy to build through to the end of the show.

Jon Schraeder, as Daddy Warbucks, is also atypical (at least based on how I've seen the role previously performed), with his billionaire lacking the cold-hearted callousness of the character. Yet Schraeder's performance is not weak, especially when he sings. And while the dramatic impact that Annie has on her fill-in father is diminished here - rather than softening his hard heart, she merely makes his soft heart a little softer - it's easily forgivable, because this Daddy Warbucks is endearing, and even downright lovable.

Among the show's other cast members, Rachelle Walljasper overplays Miss Hannigan just enough to take the edge off of the abusive character without crossing over into caricature. (Although, with her accent and mannerisms, I could swear she's channeling Cyndi Lauper.) Susie Schaechter doesn't bring much nuance to her Grace Ferrell, playing Warbucks' assistant as either agreeable with a big smile, or condescending with a
smaller
smile. Then again, this version doesn't include any romance between Grace and Warbucks, so it could be argued that the role doesn't allow Schaechter the
chance
for much nuance - besides, she's nice enough and sings beautifully.

So, too, do Pat Burr and Hannah Kurth, with each actor bringing the right amount of delightful sleaziness to their roles of Rooster and Lily. As for *Annie*'s orphans, Ali Girsch is absolutely adorable as Molly, while Peyton Tucker brings the expected bullying tenacity to Pepper; the young actresses lead an impressively large group of 26 girls who play the rest of Miss Hannigan's residents. (Countryside's adult ensemble is barely smaller, with 23 actors!)

Oddly enough, one of the weakest aspects to Myatt's production is Annie's wig. Wolf wears her own hair, so to speak, for most of the performance. At the end, however, when she's gussied up for her party, she enters the stage with the iconic red dress and curly red hair of Annie - and the wig looked so awkward that six-year-old Madison turned to me and loudly whispered, "I really don't like her hair!" (While it reminded me that I need to have a talk with Madison about theatre etiquette, the comment also elicited several long-lasting giggles from those sitting within earshot.)

Bad hair aside, though, Countryside Community Theatre's *Annie* is a nice-enough presentation of the much-loved orphan's rags-to-riches story. While Wolfe hardens her character remarkably well, and Schraeder acceptably softens his, the overall production plays out pretty much as expected.

For tickets and information, call (563)285-6228 or visit CCTOnStage .

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