

Playing Pirate: "Treasure Island," at the Playcrafters Barn Theatre through November 21

Written by Thom White

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The Playcrafters Barn Theatre's take on the classic Robert Louis Stevenson adventure novel *Treasure Island*

– adapted for the stage by Ken Ludwig – certainly kicks off with a dynamic start. Director, lighting director, and set designer Jennifer Kingry's impressive recreation of a lightning storm is ominous and tense, as is the first scene aboard a pirate ship, and if the play's pirates portray any sense of threat, it is in these opening minutes, as they snarl at and descend upon a perceived traitor and treasure-map thief. The storm ends, however, as does the scene, and the rest of the play lacks the excitement set up at the start.

The main problem, as I see it, is that the pirates of Playcrafters' *Treasure Island* are too gentlemanly. Friday night's performance lacked any sense of threat – with Kingry's cast of villains providing little reason to fear them – and while there were some notable performances, few actors managed to capture the expected tones for their characters.



James Driscoll's Long John Silver, with his gravelly voice and consistent accent, is close to being truly memorable. While impressive in the role, though, Driscoll is also too polite – too friendly and refined. It's hard to believe his Silver would hold fear-induced sway over anyone, let

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alone a crew of pirates, and there's no question, no mystery, as to whether he's good or bad. He's definitely good, undoubtedly an ally of Jim Hawkins (Stephanie Moeller) from the start rather than a potential double-crosser, and without our having a doubt as to Silver's motives, the play's tension is buried as deep as the treasure the pirates are searching for.

Moeller does a fine job of diminishing her female attributes in her portrayal of the 14-year-old Jim. With Ludwig's script mostly confining Hawkins to the role of narrator, Moeller removes any girlishly bright tones from her voice, speaking in her lower register to sound effectively male. Hawkins does step into scenes in between narrative monologues, but having been impressed by some of Moeller's past performances – her herald in the Prenzie Players' *Life's a Dream* and Hero in the same troupe's

Much Ado About Nothing

among my favorites – I wish Hawkins were written so that Moeller had more of a chance to showcase her talents.



Don Hazen's turn as Captain Flint, though, is my favorite performance of the actor's to date. I consistently enjoy Hazen's work on stage, despite his portrayals not exhibiting much range in terms of characterization; Hazen plays roughly the same character in every play in which I've seen him, from Felix in the Harrison Hilltop Theatre's *The Odd Couple* to Roger in Playcrafters' *Any Number Can Die*.

His Flint, however, is something entirely different, with Hazen giving him a coarse edginess that's (almost) frightening. Unfortunately, it's also short-lived, as Flint isn't given much time on stage. Instead, the double-cast Hazen spends most of his time as Dr. Livesy, resuming his usual personification of a character – one hardly different than past roles, but hardly less enjoyable.

Also of note: John Weigandt is a delightful dandy of a Squire Trelawney, and brought a smile to my face every moment he was on stage. As Israel Hands, Travis Hedman is the most threatening of the pirates, employing a somewhat Australian accent and a growling voice. Greg Goetz's voice, meanwhile, is stirringly desperate in the actor's opening-scene role as Jemmy Rathbone. And Tom Swenson, for me, was the highlight of the show. While good as Blind Pew, he especially shines as Ben Gunn, the crazy, marooned man who befriends Jim; Swenson emits a high-pitched, funny laugh and speaks with his entire body, his arms dancing in the air as he tells his stories.

While somewhat boring for its lack of menace, Kingry's *Treasure Island* does move along at a nice pace. Scene changes take place while Moeller is positioned off-stage – generally in an aisle of the theatre while delivering a monologue – and consequently, the play never really pauses until the intermission. Kingry also makes effective use of military-style camouflage netting to suggest jungle plants, and provides a few breath-stopping drops over the side of her impressively-built ship's helm. All told, Playcrafters'

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isn't all that bad, beyond being rather dull for a pirate play. Of course, given the level of talent on stage, that, in itself, is a little too bad.

For tickets and information, call (309)764-0330 or visit Playcrafters.com.