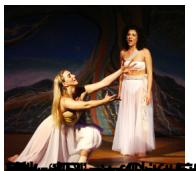
Written by Mike Schulz
Monday, 01 August 2011 06:00

As befits a musical based on the biblical book of Genesis, *Children of Eden* starts In the Beginning. Yet in discussing the Timber Lake Playhouse's current presentation of the show, it seems more appropriate to start at the end, because the curtain call – arriving more than two-and-a-half hours after the opener – appears to be one of the few sequences in which the performers understand exactly what's expected of them.

Of course, they can hardly be blamed for that. I dutifully attended Sunday school, and know my Bible stories, and saw another production of *Children of Eden* a few summers back, and *I* sure didn't get what was happening here. Really, this shouldn't have been so trying. A musical staging of the Old Testament tales of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, and Noah's Ark, composer Stephen Schwartz's and book writer John Caird's offering doesn't feature much depth or nuance, and is about as subtle as most children's pageants. Still, this deeply sincere piece boasts a fair degree of imagination and some lovely harmonies, and any grade-schooler with even remedial biblical awareness should be able to follow the narrative; the characters may be thin and the moralizing heavy-handed and Schwartz's ballads mostly drippy and unmemorable, but at least
Children of Eden
is
coherent
.

Oh, not *here* it isn't. In general, it's dangerous for a stage director to impose his or her own representational concept on a show that already works just fine without it, as audiences are oftentimes so busy deconstructing the added symbolism and metaphors that they lose sight of what the play is actually about. But in director/choreographer James Beaudry's outing, there are so *many* concepts and storytelling conceits flying around that I, for one, watched most of Thursday's production with my jaw agape – and not, in a Timber Lake rarity, because I was floored by the on-stage talent. As is proved by the curtain call, talent is most definitely present; with that joyous spitfire Sophie Brown leading an impassioned gospel number, the cast sings and sways and claps with gleeful abandon. It's no wonder, though, that the abandon is so gleeful. Timber Lake's latest is so hogtied by thematic weightiness and stylistic flourishes that its final minutes are the performers' first and only chances to really let loose.



[redacted] TimberLakePlayhouse.org .