

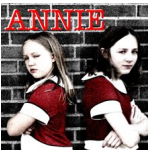
## The Moppet Takes Manhattan: "Annie," at the Clinton Area Showboat Theatre through August 7

Written by Thom White

Monday, 01 August 2011 06:01

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The Clinton Area Showboat Theatre's *Annie* feels like a show I've never seen before, even though I'd seen it *many times* prior to Thursday night's performance. While the musical's characters are portrayed in familiar ways, director Patrick Stinson's work seems new, mostly because of designer Kenneth Verdugo's sets. As odd as that sounds – the idea that a set could change the feel of an entire show – it's true, because the design not only affects the look of the production, but also how the stage space is used, and what elements are highlighted as a result.

The theme Verdugo chose for the rags-to-riches story of our redheaded heroine is smart and unexpected: Instead of resembling traditional walls, Verdugo's flats are comic-strip panels from *L'il Orphan Annie*

. Each wall is a giant panel, with the orphanage in black and white and everything outside of Annie's home of 11 years in full color, much like the concept behind the film version of *The Wizard of Oz*

. This unique design gives the production the beautiful feel of being a cartoon story – which exudes its own kind of magical fun – rather than a comic strip set in “real life.”

Beyond the flats, the sets themselves are sparsely furnished, with the exceptions of a chair here or a theatre seat there when required. Stinson is consequently able to fill the relatively small stage space with more actors, especially actors playing orphans, which gives the show a bigger feel than the space would seem to allow. And that, too, is part of the show's feeling of newness, in that this *Annie* relies so heavily on its performances, which are worthy of the attention.

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For her part, Allison Winkel's Annie is what she should be: bold, tomboyish, precocious, and able to belt out the show's most well-known numbers. Her characterization is especially effective when her lines call for a little attitude or indignation. (Winkel shares the role with Mackenna Janz, who will portray Annie during the show's second weekend.)

As Oliver Warbucks, Doug Kutzli provides the perfect balance of no-nonsense businessman and kind-hearted caretaker. His initial entrance effectively changes the tone of the piece, removing all of the previously built-up brightness and joy with a stern seriousness that's palpable. Kutzli's character then slowly but noticeably softens – at a reasonable pace, rather than, unbelievably, all at once – as Annie gets past his business head and into his feeling heart.

Maggie Ellsworth's almost prim, but wholly caring, Grace is a good counter to Kutzli's Warbucks. Eric Chambliss couldn't be any better as Rooster, attacking the role with aplomb and crowd-pleasing energy. And Nicole Ferguson manages to be bubbly-voiced yet with undertones of a darker nature, rather than just an airhead, as Lily St. Clair.

The orphans, too, are a delight, an ensemble filled with young actresses showing a knack for staying in character even when their characters aren't speaking. It's as much fun to watch their facial expressions in the background as it is to see and hear them sing and dance.

Karen Stephan's performance as Miss Hannigan, however, shocked me. Stephan previously graced the Showboat stage this summer as the dimwitted, jovial Sister Mary Amnesia in *Nurse* . In

*Annie*

, she's anything

*but*

dimwitted and jovial, delivering a nuanced performance behind her drunken exterior. Physically, Stephan never quite stands erect, instead choosing a stance with a hip jutted out to the side or her knees pulled in toward each other, making it clear that Hannigan is probably three sheets to the wind the entire time she appears on stage. And vocally, Stephan employs a mixture of high-pitched and gravelly tones or, when trying to win the affections of the laundry man (and the cop... and Daddy Warbucks... and President Roosevelt... ), speaks with an obviously feigned sweetness.

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Stephan really sells her Hannigan to the audience, which, on Thursday, was eagerly buying it – just as they, and I, bought the entire production. Even though I've seen *Annie* before and don't count it among my favorite musicals (do we really need yet

*another*

reprise of "Tomorrow"?), Stinson's production had me willingly singing the show's songs on the way home, and instilled a joy that I carried with me long after the final bows.

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