Written by Thom White
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Before November 26, I didn’t know much about Junie B. Jones beyond her being the main character in a popular children’s book series by Barbara Park. With that in mind, I felt I needed to enlist the help of my family’s resident Junie B. expert, eight-year-old Madison, to adequately review the Circa ’21 Dinner Playhouse’s production of *Junie B. in Jingle Bells, Batman Smells*. (Madison is, after all, the show’s target audience, as opposed to this 37-year-old, balding male.) I suspected that if she was pleased with the play, I would be, too.

But as it turned out, I left the show feeling that I enjoyed it whether Madison did or not. (It turned out she did.) Playwright Allison Gregory’s script and director Kimberly Furness’ staging deliver enough humor – and humor that only the adults in the audience would appreciate – that I was legitimately laughing throughout the performance, rather than simply chuckling in amusement at childish jokes. For example, at one point, the character of Sheldon (Marc Ciemiewicz) chokes on his lines in his school’s Christopher Columbus play and, in his role as the ship the Niña, breaks into a nervous rendition of Styx’s “Come Sail Away.” What eight-year-old is going to appreciate *that*? I, however, giggled over the bit for quite a while, and it was one of *many* jokes in the production to elicit lasting laughter from me.

Here’s what I learned about the Junie B. Jones universe: Junie’s first-grade teacher, Mr. Scary, is stern but has no control of his classroom. Her mortal enemy, May, is a goody-goody tattletale, and all but friendless for it. Junie frequently confides in her stuffed pink elephant, Philip Johnny Bob, who gives her frank advice. (When Junie B. plots to give May a lump of coal, Philip points out, “That’s not actually coal. It’s called a charcoal briquette.”) And our Miss Jones likes to steal the spotlight through gross (at least for a first-grader) misbehavior; in this show’s case, she sings the “Batman smells” lyrics during her class’ performance of “Jingle Bells” at the school assembly.

Sunshine Woolison-Ramsey plays our heroine for the second time on the Circa ’21 stage – following 2009’s *Junie B. Jones & a Little Monkey Business* – and the casting was a smart move on the theatre’s part. While the performer doesn’t get to showcase her fantastic vocal belt, Woolison-Ramsey does get to prove that she’s got some acting chops, layering her Junie B. with a mix of impertinence, obstinance, matter-of-fact humor (“I need five dollars; you

have
five dollars.
Boom
! Do the math!”), impatience, and heart. She also has this mildly wicked sense of humor that really tickled me. At one point, she throws the paper with her Secret Santa recipient’s name on it the ground, stomps on it, and then rubs it into the floor with her foot. And in my favorite moment in the bit, the actress concludes the tantrum with a dismissive rear kick, pushing the paper behind her in a final insult to the person named on it. Hilarious!

What strikes me about this telling of the story, though, is that any of its characters could take the lead, as all of them are so amusing, so individualized, and so enjoyably portrayed by the members of Furness’ cast. Jessica Sheridan couldn’t be more exuberant as Junie B.’s enemy May, while Ciemiewicz’s Sheldon could seemingly get away with *anything* with his comedic cuteness. Thomas Alan Taylor’s accent is spot-on as Junie’s Spanish-speaking classmate José, but his effervescent, sing-song inflections as music teacher Mr. Toot are even more memorable. Janos Horvath’s playful inner child shines through, entertainingly, as Junie B.’s best friend, Herb. Jillian Prefach delightfully pouts and brags as the well-to-do first-grader Lucille. And Brad Hauskins uses exasperated eye rolls and glances to humorously punctuate his severe, dry deliveries as Mr. Scary.

But in the end, what really mattered was what *Madison* thought of the play. And Madison, who has “read about 12 of the books” (there are currently 30), thought the Junie B. show “was really funny and awesome.” She said she liked Junie B. and Sheldon the best – I was partial to May, myself – and her favorite part of the show involved the “squeeze-a-burp,” which is a belching version of a whoopie cushion. (I guess I don’t have a Little Princess after all. Sigh.) Madison even noticed the work of lighting designers Jonathan Allender-Zivic and Joe Simpson, noting that she liked how Junie B. was alone in a spotlight while the rest of the stage was dark during her monologues. And in Madison’s highest praise for
Junie B. in Jingle Bells, Batman Smells,
she said there was nothing she didn’t like about Circa ’21’s production, and that she wants to see it again. I couldn’t have said it better myself.

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