Written by Thom White
Monday, 05 December 2011 07:51

I want to start by saying that I enjoyed the tone of the Clinton Area Showboat Theatre's presentation of *Yes, Virginia, There is a Santa Claus.* I left Saturday's performance with a warm feeling of Christmas cheer, which seems to me the point of the play, so... Christmas mission accomplished! Yet while there are some notable performances in the piece, it pains me to say that I also have a lot of minor issues with this Showboat production, and particularly with playwright Jamie Gorski's script.

Inspired by a letter written to the *New York Sun Times* and the newspaper's editorial response, both published more than 100 years ago, the play focuses on a young girl's quest to find out if there really is a Santa Claus. With her sister telling her that Jolly Old Saint Nick isn't real – and her financially troubled pal, Mary Lou, agreeing by pointing out that he's never visited *her* house – Virginia decides to check with the *New York Sun Times* personally, because as her father says, "If you see it in the *Sun*, it must be true."

The story's spirit is sweet, and director Sarah Hayes' careful treatment of the message helps, as do several of the actors. Skyler Pennock's Virginia, her adorably high-pitched voice boasting undertones of hope and uncertainty, is perfect for her part, while Allison Winkel impresses as Virginia's poor friend Mary Lou Parker, mixing sadness and against-the-odds determination in her portrayal. Doug Kutzli showcases notably larger-than-life acting ability as the stereotypical, nose-to-the-grindstone *Sun* editor Walter Gibson. And Chris Streets really ought to be ashamed of himself for, as I was told, not taking to the stage since college; he's so impressively natural as Virginia's father, Mr. O'Hanlon – with his jovial patience and smart choices on line pauses – that I couldn't help but think of how many years we've been deprived of his acting talents. You'd better not deprive us of many more, Mr. Streets!

Gorski's script, however, has too many noticeable holes in it, the biggest of which is its timeline. Virginia writes her letter to the *Sun*'s editor late on Christmas Eve. Her father then takes the letter not directly to the *Sun*, which might still be open, but to the post office. (This is well after business hours, mind you.) A postal employee then actually hand-delivers the letter to the *Sun*,

where a writer struggling to come up with a Christmas-Day-edition article stops the presses to have his editorial, inspired by Virginia's letter, included. Fenday lazily acknowledges this implausible scenario with several lines from the postal delivery boy – including one about how the postal service has "a reputation to maintain, even on the holidays" – but still: An after-hours holiday delivery from the USPS? Now, that's some Christmas magic!

The author's – or perhaps Hayes' – decision to include a choir of children also proved a bit problematic. While I like the idea of a children's choir singing carols in between scenes, which adds a nice flow to the production, several of the older girls had problems maintaining their composure at the performance I attended, breaking into distracting fits of giggles during almost every interlude.

And then there was the mouse. Early on in Saturday's performance, Ian Black's *Sun* reporter, Francis P. Church, was exceedingly frightened by a rodent. Kutzli's Walter subsequently picked up the (stuffed) mouse by the tail and attempted to drop it into the waste can next to Francis' desk. He missed, however, and then
didn't correct the mistake –
the mouse, in fact, stayed on stage through the end of the play. That might seen easily forgivable, but it presented a big problem later in the show, when Francis must pick up the waste basket; despite being so initially scared by the mouse that he had to jump on top of his desk, Black didn't bat an eye when Francis' hand was inches away from the foul little beast.

Admittedly, I'm picking on small things, but they point to a bigger problem: while sweet and cheery, the Showboat's *Yes, Virginia, There Is a Santa Claus* didn't hold my attention enough to prevent me from overlooking several slight issues. As a professional production, the piece had its problems. Still, as a holiday show intended to inspire Christmas cheer – and one that left me in a brighter mood – the Showboat's effort is a nice bit of holiday entertainment.

For tickets and information, call (563)242-6760 or visit ClintonShowboat.org .