

Written by Thom White  
Monday, 11 June 2012 06:01

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Quad City Music Guild's *Meet Me in St. Louis* seems to me a beautifully gift-wrapped empty box. Designer Kevin Pieper's sets are grand and detailed with touches, such as light fixtures and curtains, that are appropriate for the piece's 1904 setting. Sara Laufer's choreography fits the feel of the songs, exuding high-energy fun without being overdone. Costume designer Cindy Monroe's period creations are gorgeous – particularly the women's feathered, wide-brimmed hats. And the actors are, for the most part, in fine voice, and offer cheerily spirited characterizations. I enjoyed the sights and sounds during Thursday's performance. The story, however, barely interested me.

Director Tom Swegle's treatment of the material, which suggests a "good old days" time when life was simpler and happier, has a gentle touch to it, yet with evident effort made in presenting the musical brightly and gaily. And Swegle's handling of the musical is much welcome, as anything less wouldn't be worth watching, given that playwright Hugh Wheeler's plot plods along so slowly.



The core of the piece involves the budding romances of Rose and Esther Smith, two daughters of a prominent St. Louis family. Rose, the eldest, likes a wealthy boy who is attending Yale; she hopes he'll propose to her and be her escort to the Christmas ball. Meanwhile, Esther, the second-eldest, has her eyes on the new boy next door. That's pretty much the gist of it, though

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there is some excitement over the upcoming Louisiana Purchase Exposition World's Fair, plus a conflict for the girls as their father decides to move the family to New York and away from the daughters' beaux. However, the long-distance-move storyline isn't introduced until the second act, which leaves the first act with little more happening than the girls flirting with the boys, and the youngest Smith daughter, Tootie, proclaiming that her doll has died, and insisting on a funeral and burial in the backyard with her *other* dead dolls.

Thankfully, the musical features fun, memorable songs by Hugh Martin and Ralph Blane, including the title song, "The Trolley Song," and "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas." These numbers are sung beautifully by the cast, particularly Elisabeth Gonzalez as Rose and Lauren VanSpeybroeck as Esther, and even Laila Haley's Tootie delivers impressive vocals, offering balcony-reaching volume, an impressive vibrato, and a beautiful tone. (Considering the elementary-school-aged actress' moxie, my hope is that we'll be seeing a lot of Haley on-stage in the coming years.) On Thursday, some of the male cast members struggled with pitch, but the music is well worth the time spent seeing the production.



So, too, is VanSpeybroeck's performance. The actress exudes brightness even when her character is sullen or angry, but because VanSpeybroeck is so charming, it doesn't seem inappropriate. When things aren't going her Esther's way, VanSpeybroeck wears a pout just under the surface of her expressions – one that's not *fully* there, but one that's present enough to render Esther irresistibly cute. Gonzalez, meanwhile, shapes her Rose with a delightfully flirtatious condescension reminiscent of Vivien Leigh's Scarlett O'Hara, but without the mean-spirited manipulation. Gonzalez' dismissiveness and upturned nose are employed playfully rather than cruelly, and her performance is especially fun to watch when Rose plays hard-to-get.

As Mrs. Smith, Leigh VanWinkle's delivery of "You'll Hear a Bell" reveals a notably dreamy joy behind her lovely vocalizations. Faith Osborn's rough edges as Smith sister Agnes are befitting of a girl entering her teens. John Donald O'Shea seems to relish acting the playful Grandpa, with his happy countenance and cheerful teasing of his granddaughters. And Jay Rakus nicely handles the rather flat character given him, as Mr. Smith is a crotchety, impatient man with a temper and controlling air, even though his family seems to ignore him quite a bit. (It's almost as if they tolerate his tantrums and keep him around for the money he provides.)

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It's a shame, though, that the material with which such a talented cast and crew are working is so weak – excepting the songs, of course, even though some of the numbers, among them "The Trolley Song," don't advance the story, and seem to be included just for the sake of being included. Given the way Quad City Music Guild handles *Meet Me in St. Louis*, I'm sure the production would have been even more entertaining than it already is if the plot were enjoyable, too.

*Meet Me in St. Louis runs at the Prospect Park Auditorium (1584 34th Avenue, Moline) through June 17, and tickets and information are available by calling (309)762-6610 or visiting [QCMusicGuild.com](http://QCMusicGuild.com)*