Written by Thom White
Monday, 02 July 2012 06:00

Prior to seeing Saturday's performance of *The Musical Adventures of Flat Stanley* at the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse, my partner's daughter Madison was most interested in seeing how the production would show Stanley getting flattened. I'll admit: I was most curious about that part, too.

Based on the children's book by author Jeff Brown, the stage adaptation introduces us to the Lambchop family, and shows us how the boy Stanley (Steve Lasiter) becomes, literally, *Flat* Stanley. But while director Kimberly Furness does not show the actual impact of Stanley's bulletin board landing on top of him, she does create dramatic tension at that moment. Cari Downing, with a nasally accent that's delightfully reminiscent of Lily Tomlin's Edith Ann, lowers her sentient Bulletin Board over Stanley's head, and knowing he was about to get smacked by this large piece of framed cork board, I actually gasped as the hit was about to happen. Just before contact, though, the theatre goes dark, and when the lights come up again, Lasiter has switched clothes and – through some clever costume trickery by designer Gregory Hiatt – now appears flattened.

It's a great moment, and as the show continues Stanley's adventures by having him sent to California, Paris, and Hawaii, the musical offers lessons in creating your own adventure right where you are, and is filled with tender moments and sentiment. While much gentler than *Diary of a Worm, a Spider, & a Fly*
, Circa '21's previous kids' show,
The Musical Adventures of Flat Stanley
is still a lot of fun.

Lasiter's Stanley matches the production's tone with his character's come-what-may mentality. While eager for experiences, Lasiter shapes his character as a nice boy you'd readily welcome into your home (by way of the mail slot, of course); he's adventurous yet calm. And as Stanley's younger brother Arthur, Tim Stompanato seems to be in a constant state of wide-eyed wonder, exuding obvious affection for, and admiration of, his big brother. Together, the two share what was Madison's and my favorite scene, during which they sing the song "I Wish I Were," and dream of being a wizard like Harry Potter, or a Jedi knight, or an inventor of a robot dog. There's

such playfulness in the boys' voices and in their actions that it stirred up the childlike dreamer in me. (Madison, meanwhile, kept talking about that number during much of the car ride home.)

While Lasiter plays Stanley for the entire musical, the rest of the cast members portray multiple characters. In addition to Arthur, Stompanato enacts the wildly eccentric Dr. Dan, who never gets a name right and constantly refers to the Lambchops as "the Porkchops," eliciting some of the audience's biggest laughs. He's also a suave Hollywood agent, a condescending, French-accented Napoleon, and a go-go dancer (don't worry, moms, it's G-rated go-go), while Janos Harvoth – whose Mr. Lambchop is a fine, stereotypically perfect father – assumes roles as entertainment reporter Herb Wavecrest, another go-go dancer, and, with high energy and hilarity, the French-accented Louvre curator O'Jay D'Art.

Beyond playing her Mrs. Lambchop as a sort of Donna Reed with an edge, Sara King (who is a must-see as Paulette in Circa '21's current production of *Legally Blonde: The Musical*) is all smiles as Bikini Wahini, Stanley's co-star in a surfing film. King also laughs with humorous condescension as a Hollywood assistant, and is simply delightful as a thief with an eastern-European accent, whom Stanley thwarts while visiting the Louvre. And while Bulletin Board is my favorite of her roles, Downing is also a friendly, self-assured mail carrier named Mrs. Carter, a Hollywood assistant to match King's, and a simple, genteel Mona Lisa, in what appears a successful attempt to match the figure's personality with the famous smile.

The family-friendly fun of Circa '21's *The Musical Adventures of Flat Stanley* is helped along by choreographer Erin Churchill's dance moves, which feature steps that children would actually perform – occasionally, the actors simply jump up and down in place to the beat of the music – and which are notably appropriate for the age group for which the production is aimed. Other than Stanley himself, there's actually nothing flat
about
Furness' production. Madison said she loved it, and couldn't stop talking about the characters and the songs hours after seeing Saturday's performance. I couldn't blame her; I was remembering my favorite parts, too.

The Musical Adventures of Flat Stanley *runs at the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse (1828 Third Avenue, Rock Island) through July 21, and information and tickets are available by calling (309)786-7733 extension 2 or visiting Circa21.com .*