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The Circa ’21 Dinner Playhouse opened its presentation of *Miracle on 34th Street* on Friday, and if you’re familiar with the 1947 film classic this musical version is based on, you should know that Laila Haley, who portrays Susan Walker, isn’t on a par with the movie’s Natalie Wood. She’s actually so much
better
than Wood that it’s not even funny.

Haley, however, *is* funny, as well as polished, and charming, and, unfortunately, one of scant few reasons to catch Circa ’21’s holiday offering. As most of you likely know, Susan, in
Miracle on 34th Street
, is the little girl who becomes convinced that the Santa Claus at Macy’s department store is the genuine article (and – Spoiler Alert – he is), and with her comedic cynicism, snappy banter, and penchant for calling her mother “Doris,” Susan could easily come off as unbearably precocious. It’s a trap that even the adorable Wood couldn’t quite evade, yet while Haley is never less than endearing here, that’s never
all
she is. Appearing whip-smart and more believably naturalistic than most of the adults around her, the young performer makes Susan’s wiser-than-her-years bearing seem like the inevitable byproduct of a sensible and actively curious mind, and her lovely singing voice is clear and deservedly confident. With the clever and focused Haley in the role, I was grateful for Susan’s every moment on stage. Why oh why – at least for the sake of Circa ’21’s production – did composer/book writer Meredith Willson have to
forget
about Susan for his musical’s entire last half-hour?

If you weren’t aware that *The Music Man* creator Willson ever wrote a musical called *Miracle on 34th Street*
, that’s because he didn’t, as this 1963 work actually opened on Broadway under the generically awful title
Here’s Love
. But even though Willson’s book (despite Susan’s odd vanishing act) remains relatively faithful to the movie’s script, that title is hardly the only thing separating the film from the stage experience, the plotting and dialogue for which feel so forced, and the songs for which are so

relentlessly blah, that I could barely glean what made the movie a holiday perennial in the first place. Circa ’21’s presentation, directed and choreographed by Ann Nieman, is a mostly solid attempt at disguising the depressing mediocrity of Willson’s achievement, with costumer Gregory Hiatt's contributions (especially the pig-ballerina and scary-ass-blue-monkey designs of the show's toy-themed Dream Ballet) aiding enormously. Yet on Friday, the disguise was just about all I saw – a group of talented professionals trying, occasionally in vain, to make a show play better than it should. (The fault may not rest entirely with Willson; I’ve now seen three separate musical takes on *Miracle*, and none of them has managed to capture the tale’s inherent sweetness.)

I could compose a lengthy list of this *Miracle*’s narrative failings, from the blitheness with which important plot points – especially those involving Santa’s imposed hospitalization at Bellevue – are established and wrapped up to the awkward and rather unpleasant courtship written for romantic leads Doris Walker and Fred Gaily. (I know that *Miracle* is a period piece and all, but I still wish that Doris didn’t fall for this Marine-corps veteran – a man who condescendingly calls the thirtysomething mother “little girl” – so quickly after he “comically” threatened to punch her in the nose.) But beyond the weakness of Willson’s score, with its songs that are superfluous at best and actively irritating at worst, the show’s biggest detriment is that few of its characters appear to be participating in the *same* show, and sadly, this consequently holds true for Nieman’s cast.

Erin Churchill, of whom I will always be an unapologetically biased fan, imbues Doris with delightful, tough-talking moxie and *His Girl Friday* sass, and she’s very nicely paired opposite Don Denton’s Fred; while I may not have bought their relationship, the actors themselves are consistently enjoyable and in excellent voice. These lightly stylized figures, however, sit uncomfortably beside a number of actors forced into broadly cartoonish stereotypes – notably the game Tristan Layne Tapscott and Marc Ciemiewicz, as a Macy’s employee and Santa’s psychiatrist, respectively – or roles designed with no discernible character at all. (Ensemble members Chris Causer and Rachelle Walljasper have some fine moments, but I was bummed seeing Joseph J. Baez asked to do so little after doing so much, so wonderfully, in Circa ’21’s recent *Smokey Joe’s Café*.)

As for the jolly old elf himself, the fiercely gifted John Payonk delivers vigor, spirit, and typically

intimidating baritone notes to spare. But even St. Nick seems oddly disconnected from the frequently meaningless goings-on here – did we really need three verses of the time-wasting ditty "Plastic Alligator"? – and Payonk is left with little to do but crinkle and grin and bellow the occasional "*Ha ha ha*!" (Yes. "Ha ha ha." Not "ho ho ho." I don't know why.) In truth, and despite the talents involved, the most *honest* personality you'll find in this *Miracle on 34th Street* comes courtesy of Laila Haley and her grade-school castmates Katie Casel, Grace Moore (speaking Dutch), and Krianna Walljasper, whose freshness and natural charisma – unlike those of their adult co-stars – aren't allowed to be buried by the material. Circa '21's latest may be wanting, but at least the combined presence of these promising young talents *is* something of a miracle.

Miracle on 34th Street *runs at the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse (1828 Third Avenue, Rock Island) through December 30, and more information and tickets are available by calling (309)786-7733 extension 2 or visiting Circa21.com .*