

Written by Mike Schulz

Monday, 12 November 2012 06:03

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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

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*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.

# Is You Is or Is You Ain't My Santa?: "Miracle on 34th Street," at the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse through Dec

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[Circa21.com](http://Circa21.com)