

Written by Thom White

Monday, 26 November 2012 06:00



The Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse and director Kimberly Furness have done it again, crafting a family production that's charming and a whole lot of fun for both the kids *and* the adults in the audience. My partner's nine-year-old daughter Madison and I enjoyed Friday's performance of *Freckleface Strawberry: The Musical* immensely, even though neither of us is at all familiar with the children's-book character the show is based on.

Seeing playwrights Gary Kupper's and Rose Caiola's stage adaptation of author Julianne Moore's book had me wishing that book existed when *I* was a child, given its lessons about diversity, acceptance, and valuing others for, or in spite of, their differences. Strawberry is a freckled, red-haired child who is made fun of for her looks, and the show finds her hating her facial spots and wishing they'd disappear so much that she'll do anything – such as donning a funny-looking pink-and-green ski mask – to hide her identity, even if it means no longer being herself.



For Circa '21's production, Mariah Thornton, in the title role, exudes both joy and the innocence of a child, making it easy to like her, and want her to be happy, when she's upset about her freckles. Thornton is so fully in character that I didn't even question her age (despite the actress being at least a decade older than Strawberry), and when she dances, her movements are appropriately awkward; though obviously excited about dancing, Thornton's Strawberry moves as though she's not fully *committed* to the dance, with her self-consciousness preventing her from completely extending her arms and legs. (As for the production's dancing, choreographer Andrea Moore shows true talent for interpreting songs through movement, and her numbers transcend a standard "children's musical" level while still delivering child-like fun. Anyone who can work in the "sprinkler" dance move in a way that seems appropriate is, in my book, a choreographic genius.)

As Strawberry is dealing with her pigment-centric issues, her friends are having troubles of their own. Don Denton's Danny is an athlete struggling with his schoolwork, and it's so good to see Denton on the Circa '21 stage again, given the kindness and likability that he brings to every role. He's especially enjoyable to watch in character parts, as he is here when he plays

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Strawberry's bratty baby brother and – in a fantastic dream sequence in which Strawberry's freckles are embodied as classic gangsters *à la The Godfather* – a mobster who seems a sort of Italian version of Gilbert Gottfried. Dani Westhead's perky, mean-girl-in-training Emily, meanwhile, wishes she were blonder, and Westhead softens the role's stereotypical, popular-girl exterior with bright, air-headed energy.



Janos Horvath, a welcome regular in most of Circa '21's family productions, exudes youthful dorkiness as Strawberry's friend Harry, and his Don Fontaine in the mobster-freckles dream sequence would steal the show if the rest of the production weren't so good. (Mimicking Marlon Brando's Don Corleone, Horvath brings laugh-worthy moments to his ordering around of three buffoonish gangsters.) And although Danielle Barnes, in that same scene, shines as Francine Freckle, her snooty yet approachable Ballet Girl is one of the most fully formed characters in the musical; during a scene in which other characters play basketball while Ballet Girl waits for acknowledgment, Barnes' joyful anticipation leading to painful letdown broke my heart.

With most of the cast members portraying multiple characters, Tracy Pelzer-Timm has the lion's share of roles to fill. And despite her schoolgirl Jane falling a tad on the side of caricature, the actress' performance as a teacher is a stitch (her favoritism toward the smarter kids emerges through slightly uppity vocal inflections), and her portrayal of Strawberry's mother is full of sincerity, motherly love, patience, and kindness – she's the quintessential mom. Meanwhile, playing a smart kid who wishes he were athletic so he could be popular like Danny, Brad Hauskins pulls off an adorable blend of nerdiness and slightly dry humor, with his likability making me want Strawberry to pick him as her best friend.

The show's message, however, isn't about picking one friend over another, but about learning to be friends with others despite your differences with them. And with Furness establishing a perfect tone by avoiding heavy-handedness, Kupper presenting enjoyable songs with clever lyrics, and the show offering sensitive treatment of Moore's characters, I was touched by the message of Circa '21's *Freckleface Strawberry: The Musical* – and hoped, as a father, that Madison was equally affected, and left feeling better about herself and the things that make her special.

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Freckleface Strawberry: The Musical *runs at the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse (1818 Third Avenue, Rock Island) through December 29, and more information and tickets are available by calling (309)786-7733 extension 2 or visiting*

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