

Written by Thom White

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Billed as “the funniest and most tuneful *Church Basement Ladies* yet,” *A Mighty Fortress Is Our Basement* had me laughing more than I expected to during Friday night’s performance. Having had a too-hearty helping of the first two Lutheran-themed kitchen musicals, I couldn’t help but have low expectations for the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse’s production of this fourth show in the series. Yet while this sequel still falls into some of the expected traps, it also had enough humor – and one especially entertaining song – to keep me amused.

In this show with a book by Greta Grosch and music and lyrics by Drew Jansen, four Minnesota churchwomen prepare for the youngest lady’s confirmation and the upcoming marriage of their pastor (to – gasp! – a Catholic) in the midst of a 1960 reformation. Directed here by Curt Wollan, the plot seems too thin for its nearly two-and-a-half-hour presentation, and the narrative’s events are basically relegated to the background while members of the Lutheran quartet (familiar to audiences of the series’ previous incarnations) learn to drive, talk about boys and the maid of honor’s ample bosom, and argue whether a youth group trek to Florida is worth making. As with previous *CBLs*, there’s just not a lot of substance in *A Mighty Fortress*; the show is a mostly bland “slice of life” look into these four ladies’ time in their church kitchen. However, this time around, the installment does include a little sexual humor, a laugh-worthy sight gag involving one of the women’s undergarments, and a funny, if clichéd, bit in which another lady encounters a bottle of blackberry liquor she mistakes for syrup gone bad (but

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drinks anyway).



Designer Scott Herbst's set will be familiar to anyone who has seen Circa '21's productions of the previous *CBLs*, with its vintage sink, stove, and accordion-style counter window that seems a must-have for every church I've visited. Herbst's design nails the look and feel of a church kitchen, while costume designer Gregory Hiatt's 1960s creations fit the time period and personalities of each woman to a T. Lighting designer Jonathan Allender-Zivic even pulls off an impressive sleight-of-hand during a storm sequence, flickering the table lights throughout the theatre to mimic lightning – an effective surprise that made me jump in my seat a little.

Also familiar to *CBL* fans is Nikki Savitt, who returns to Circa '21 as Mavis, the role she played in the theatre's productions of the series' first and second parts. Savitt still has that slightly feisty charm that renders her Mavis both likable and comical, and thankfully she's only forced to do her generally overused, door-opening thrust shtick ("One, two, three, *uff da!*") three times, although in the span of about five minutes. It still feels overplayed, but at least it's brief.

Kay Francis' no-nonsense, ultra-conservative, prudish battle-ax Vivian manages to be more amusing than mean, and has the honor of performing the musical's catchiest tune, "Vivian Snustad: Pickle Queen!" Boasting of her grand-prize win for her country-fair pickles, Vivian sings of her prowess, and with its high energy and clever melody and lyrics that aren't awkward or muddled by too fast a tempo – as most of the other numbers are – the song feels like it's from an entirely different show without feeling disjointed from it. (It also left me wishing the rest of the musical matched the humor and cohesive theme of this one show-stopping number.)



Carrie SaLoutos' Karin is at her comedic best when mocking her mother-in-law in a frenetic, crazed depiction of the woman's criticism of Karin's cupboard-organization skills and under-salted potatoes. As Karin's daughter Beverly, Kimberly Steffen endearingly matches the sweetness of her character as written. And Tom Walljasper, returning to his Circa '21 role as the pastor, delivers some of the show's funniest lines (which are actually ad libs) while announcing the real audience's birthdays and anniversaries, which, on Friday, included his following the

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celebrant name "Margarita" with a "No thanks, I'm driving." (I was tickled both by the joke and Walljasper's laugh *at* his joke.)

Circa '21's audience certainly seemed to enjoy *A Mighty Fortress Is Our Basement*, with at least half of the patrons offering a standing ovation at the end. Personally, I was more amused by wondering why those people liked the musical so much, cackling at moments that were mildly amusing at best. Yet although this latest

*CBL*

installment still doesn't have the makings of a great musical, the four women central to the series still possess some charm. While the issues they're dealing with aren't all that interesting, and most of their songs aren't all that memorable, the ladies, by now, are at least familiar and feel like friends, which might be the reason people return sequel after sequel after sequel after

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*A Mighty Fortress Is Our Basement runs at the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse (1828 Third Avenue, Rock Island) through June 1, and more information and tickets are available by calling (309)786-7733 extension 2 or visiting [Circa21.com](http://Circa21.com).*