

## Circa '21's "State Fair" a Midwestern Treat

Written by Kim Eastland  
Monday, 24 July 2000 18:00

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The Show. Once upon a time long, long ago (over a half century), in a far away fantasy land (innocent, simple Iowa) there was a wonderful family (the completely believable, wholesome Frakes) who looked forward to a magical event (the yearly state fair) each summer that made a lot of their hard work (putting up pickles, making mince meat, raising livestock, etc.) seem like something special.

Sounds silly today, doesn't it? But it wasn't silly in 1946; it was a marvelously down-to-earth way of life, one that the folks in the Midwest cherished and one for which they were renowned. As a Midwest resident yourself, it's part of your heritage. And a more sensible heritage it was, too, than that of coastal fads and urban cynicism. A lot of plays written at that time fluffed up that "simple, country life," but Rodgers & Hammerstein's *State Fair* didn't.

In the R & H family, *State Fair* is the unassuming sister – an unflashy musical full of songs that help explain what's inside of people and what motivates them. The play's songs never were huge chart-busters, but they never upstaged the show's characters or its central message, either. Instead of a grand, almost operatic setting or theme, they are a musical part of the dialogue, sung from the heart. Like the people who sing them, they are full of basic wisdom and love.

That is what is so great about this play, and this particular, fantastic production of it at Circa '21 (which I saw on July 14). Director Marc Robin never loses sight of its characters and their connection to each other or what is important to them. When the big-city reporter complains about there being no real story to the state fair, the daughter says, "What do you mean? This is the biggest story in the world ... well, my world anyway." And that is the unique aspect of *State Fair* ;

it's about this small family's world and how important produce contests and livestock competitions are to them, just as important as stocks and bonds or kings and queens are to others. It's about hope and disappointment. The kids find love on the midway and learn new things about themselves by spending time with others who are different. Not everything turns out the way you want by the end of the show, but neither does life. As one family member says, "Win, place, or show, we're all in it together."

What a tremendous sentiment in today's world of greed and "screw everyone else" attitude!

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This is the way things were back then ... in many ways a far better "place" than we live in now.

**The Cast and Performance.** To say this group of performers are well-cast is like saying Iowa is a tad level – a gross understatement. Ma & Pa Frake (Paul Kerr and Suzanne Marie Ogden) make you believe they've been in love for years – the type of marriage that survives on humor and respect. Their scenes and songs together make you remember why folks married and stayed that way. The twentysomething son, Wayne (Erick Holloway), grows up at the state fair by finding out he can't always get what he wants, but it can be cherished anyway. His character's earnest appeal doesn't rely on the usual "Aw, shucks!" caricature, and his voice matches his gentle, sincere demeanor. But it is the central character of Margie (Cara Annmarie Heitman) that most impresses. She is the quintessential Midwestern sweetheart, but she is her own person, too. Not content to "settle" down with someone for the sake of social convenience, she wants something uniquely hers out of life. And she knows it when it comes along.

Miss Heitman's character is so real, her voice so clear and beautiful, her presence so charming, that you like her family even more for raising such a great kid (which is an amazing extension of a stage family). The other two bang-up, stand-out performances are the wolf/reporter Pat (Dominic Paoillio) stalking Margie (you never really know where this guy's coming from, but he can win your heart), and the vamp/songbird Emily (Tammy Bednash), who enmeshes Wayne despite her intentions to "keep it light." Her almost heart-rending "That's The Way It Happens" was my favorite song of the evening, reflecting perfectly the two sides of this alluring yet sad character.

**The Choreography.** I would be seriously remiss if I were to neglect drawing your attention to the incredible choreography (also by the astonishing Robin). I had no expectations for dance numbers beforehand (I mean, it is a state fair), but this level of choreography just isn't normally seen in the Quad Cities, no matter the theatre. Sometimes exuberant, sometimes romantic, always classy and just right for the scene – it was an unexpected treat and, alone, is worth the price of admission.

**Bootleggers.** I must point out that this Bootlegger show, built upon the anniversary of another Iowa hit, *The Music Man*, is the most enjoyable one I've ever seen. Witty, fast-paced, and well-performed, it sets the audience up perfectly for *State Fair*

**Wrap-up.** A huge, excited Midwest hurrah to this excellent production in what certainly must be one of Circa '21's banner years. Embrace what it meant to be a Midwesterner (and still means to many) with *State Fair*, running through September 9 at Circa '21 Playhouse. You can make reservations by calling 786-7733, extension 2.