

'Christmas Belles' rings with laughter

Dispatch-Argus - August 11, 2010 - by Julie Jensen

A fast-paced show delivered with a Texas twang evoked laugh after laugh in Richmond Hill Players' current production of "Christmas Belles" by Nicholas Hope, Jessie Jones and Jamie Wooten.

Director John Van de Woestyne got the dizzying entrances and exits (16 scenes in Act II alone) clearly defined.

Set in Fayro, Texas, it opens in the Bookoo Bokay Floral Shop and Bus Depot, where Miss Geneva Musgrave (Eugenia Giebel) asserts herself.

Next, we meet Gina Jo Dubberly, a delightful ingénue played by Kady Patterson.

Diane Greenwood is spectacular in her costumes and facial expressions in the role of Honey Raye. Futrelle, director of the Christmas pageant. Valeree Pieper is Twink Futrelle, Honey Raye's sister, who has been in jail and still wears her prison garb. Lorrie Lord is the third sister, Frankie Futrelle Dubberly, Gina Jo's mama. Nancy Teerlinck is Rhonda Lynn Lampley, recently discovered to be yet another of the Futrelle sisters.

When Gina Jo's aunt, preparing for the Christmas pageant, tells her "I want you to be Mary," she says, "I am. I'm a happy person." She's not so happy when she realizes she has swallowed her engagement ring.

Stan Weimer is Dub Dubberly, Gina Jo's father, and the husband of Frankie Futrelle Dubberly. He also plays Santa Claus. Frankie is pregnant with twins; asked what she wants for Christmas, she says, "I want Santa to get a vasectomy."

Nicholas Charles Waldbusser is Justin Waverly, the pastor who loves Gina Jo. Larry Lord is John Curtis Buntner, the sheriff, and also Elvis Presley. Michael Skiles is Raynerd Chisum, who enters periodically pulling a coaster wagon with a lollipop in his hand. Susan Philhower is Patsy Price, an elegant poser.

More scraps of Fayro humor:

- "My husband is a real angel." "You're lucky. Mine is still alive."
- As they prepare for the pageant, Honey Raye says, "We're limping toward Bethlehem."
- Honey Raye is having hot flashes: "I don't know why they call it menopause. There's no pause to it."

The sisters invite the audience to participate in a singalong, doing "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing" and "Joy to the World." Birth pangs finally strike Frankie, and Raynerd pulls Patsy onstage in the wagon.

After the curtain call, one audience member said, "My sides hurt from laughing."

'Christmas Belles' gives spirited laughs

Quad-City Times - August 12, 2010 - by David Burke

The Richmond Hill Players seem to hit their stride when it comes to doing series of plays. First it was the "Above the Tavern" trilogy, which concluded last year.

Now director John VanDeWoestyne has reunited the cast of 2008's "Dearly Beloved" for its sequel, "Christmas Belles," and the third installment is still in good hands. (The first in the series, "Dearly Departed," was staged at Richmond Hill Barn Theatre in 2001.)

The comedy series is centered around the small-town Texas sisters Honey Raye (Diane Greenwood), Twink (Valeree Pieper) and Frankie (Lorrie Lord) at Christmastime. Honey Raye is directing the church program, "Bethlehem-a-Palooza," middle-aged Frankie is thisclose to giving birth to twins and Twink is in

an orange jumpsuit, having been arrested and jailed for a little firebomb aimed at her ex that turned into arson and involved a trailer court.

Characters and actors also returning are Eugenia Giebel, as the owner of a floral shop and bus station; Kady Patterson and Nicholas Waldbusser, as a couple close to engagement; Larry Lord, as the local sheriff's deputy; Stan Wiemer, as Frankie's kidney stone-suffering husband; and Susan Philhower, as the disapproving in-law.

New this time around are Nancy Teerlinck, as a woman who's plopped into the family; and Michael Skiles, with perfect timing as the neighborhood simpleton.

The humor delivered by the cast is right on, with equal parts "King of the Hill," "The Andy Griffith Show" and Carol Burnett's "Mama's Family" sketches, plus some Jerry Springer and a little Linus from "A Charlie Brown Christmas" thrown in.

VanDeWoestyne and the cast deliver characters, but not caricatures, with the exception of Greenwood's frantic church pageant director. If everyone were as over-the-top as Honey Raye, "Christmas Belles" wouldn't have as much of its charm.

It would be easy to chide Richmond Hill for putting on a Christmas show in the middle of August, but an audience-invited sing-along of "O Come All Ye Faithful" and "Joy to the World" seemed to bring the temperature down a degree or two outside.

Deep in the Har-de-Har of texas

River Cities Reader - August 11, 2010 - by Thom White

The audience at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre's Saturday-night performance of Christmas Belles - a sequel to Dearly Beloved, which the theatre staged in 2008 - seemed to really want to enjoy this second visit with the eccentric Texans of the Futrelle family. Yet with its dull, predictable punchlines, the first act was filled with polite chuckles, but only peppered with honest laughs.

Their subdued responses were likely not due to lack-of-trying on the part of director John VanDeWoestyne's cast. But Jessie Jones', Nicholas Hope's, and Jamie Wooten's script - about the Futrelles' attempts to put on an annual Christmas pageant in the midst of a pregnancy, a marriage proposal, a jail sentence, and a kidney stone - doesn't really support the actors' jollity until this comedy's characters stage that pageant; the show (within the show), and the backstage antics surrounding it, are the best parts of Christmas Belles, and they don't take place until about a third of the way into Act II.

Richmond Hill's players certainly have a good go at their roles, anyway. Eugenia Giebel is at the top of her game when her character, Miss Geneva Musgrave, names herself as co-director in the pageant's quickly degenerating eleventh hour; Giebel's haughty sense of self-worth is wickedly smile-inducing. So, too, is Susan Philhower's condescending Patsy Price. Almost, but not quite, crossing the line into caricature, Philhower managed to play a hateful character without my hating her. (An on-stage blunder definitely added to her likability: After Philhower lost her grip on a pill bottle - sending it flying into the audience, and eliciting the night's biggest laughs - the actress reclaimed the bottle and took a quick bow before regaining her composure.)

Diane Greenwood overplays Honey Raye Futrelle to great amusement, rather than annoyance. The audience just loved her, as did I, and never more so than when she'd storm off stage on her way back into the Christmas-pageant fray. (Greenwood begins each march with an exaggerated look that's so hysterical, it leaves the audience in fits of laughter well beyond her exit.) My one issue with Greenwood's performance here, and it's a minor one, is her tendency to play to all the seats in Richmond Hill's theatre-in-the-round setting by turning 360 degrees during her longer lines. Other than that, she was the highlight of the night, showcasing her great talent at physical humor.

Nancy Teerlinck, Lorrie Lord, and Valeree Pieper would benefit from the opportunity for similar comedic opportunities. As Rhonda Lynn Lampley, Frankie Futrelle Dubberly and Twink Futrelle, respectively, they are adequately likable in their roles, but don't offer much variety in their performances. Pieper, though, does at least blossom in a couple of scenes when her character is tied to a chair, and she unleashes a crowd-pleasing rage that's almost caveman- (cavewoman-?) like in nature.

Stan Weimer is very funny as Dub Dubberly, making it a shame that the second act leaves him with little to do beyond running across the stage, screaming in pain, as Dub passes his kidney stone. It's entertaining at first, but loses its amusing edge through repetition. Nicholas Charles Waldbusser, through furtive facial expressions, shades his interim pastor Justin Waverly with uncertainty, but I wish Michael Skiles had more to work with in his character, Raynerd Chisum. Skiles is endearing in his subtly dim-witted portrayal, but I detected hints of greater acting ability were he in a role that called for it. And Kady Patterson, too, shouldn't be required to hide her talent. Still, while her Gina Jo Dubberly is simple, Patterson's portrayal of her is not; it's clear that she put forth the effort to shape a full character, creating a more detailed individual than her material would suggest.

In the end, it's a shame that Christmas Belles' script doesn't consistently live up to the Richmond Hill Players' performance of it. VanDoeWoestyne's effort to bring back the fun of the Futrelles is evident, but he's hampered by a play that doesn't really hit its stride until it's more than halfway finished.

Geneseo cast celebrates 'Christmas' in August

Moline Dispatch - July 29, 2010 - by Claudia Loucks

Kady Patterson made her debut with the Richmond Hill Players in 2008 in "Dearly Beloved," and she will return to the Barn stage next week with the Geneseo group's production of the sequel, "Christmas Belles."

Miss Patterson plays Gina Jo Dubberly, who gets roped into playing the virginal and mild-mannered Mary in a church Christmas program in this "Southern-fried yuletide comedy," written by Jessie Jones, Nicholas Hope and Jamie Wooten. Veteran Richmond Hill director John VanDeWoestyne is at the helm.

According to the director, the program spins hilariously out of control in a farce about squabbling siblings, family secrets, a surly Santa, a woman scorned, kidney stones, a vengeful sheep and a reluctant Elvis impersonator, as the fabulous Futrelle sisters of Fayro, Texas, hit the stage.

Other members of the "Christmas Belles" cast include Eugenia Giebel, Diane Greenwood, Susan Philhower, Mike Skiles and Stan Weimer, all of Geneseo; Valeree Pieper, Moline; Larry and Lorrie Lord, Galva; Nancy Teerlinck, Lynn Center, and Nicholas Waldbusser, Hampton.

Miss Patterson graduated from Geneseo High School in 2008, and that same summer played the title character in Genesis Guild's production of "Hecuba" and had a part in "Funny Valentines" at Richmond. She said her favorite show is "The Wizard of Oz"; she played the Wicked Witch in her senior year at Geneseo.

"It was probably one of the most difficult roles I've played," she said. "I had to ride a bike on stage, keep track of Toto, paint my upper body green in less than 10 minutes, have a bucket of water thrown at me, and pretend to melt through a 2-by-2-foot hole in a platform 5 feet off the ground and onto a wobbly ladder.

"One of the boys working on crew crouched under the platform and helped guide my ankles as I blindly felt around for the ladder," she said. "That was an exciting scene in every performance."

A Geneseo resident for all her 21 years, Miss Patterson participated in speech team, musicals, fall play, group interpretation and contest play at Geneseo. "Eventually I did my time as speech captain and Thespian president," she said. "I also was a percussionist in band, and when I didn't have rehearsals, I could go to Scholastic Bowl practices, which always turned out to be more fun than I could shake a stick at."

In her freshman year at Hofstra University in Hempstead, N.Y., Miss Patterson was cast as Maia in "When We Dead Awaken," in a children's adaptation of "Goldilocks," and in "Jolly Jib Jive," an original screenplay made by the Film Club. After that year, she transferred to Monmouth College back in Illinois, where she is majoring in sociology. However, her theater scholarship requires her to participate in productions each semester. She has been a narrator in "A Christmas Carol" and played Ruth in Harold Pinter's "The Homecoming."

Miss Patterson, daughter of Craig and Kathy Patterson of Geneseo, has a summer job at Wonders of Children Day Care Center in Geneseo. When she returns to Monmouth, her responsibilities will include serving as co-president of Students for Environmental Awareness.