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Annie for President

MPC's production could be the tip of a revival for this surprisingly political musical.

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By Ryan Masters



Sun'll Come Out: Annie (Hannah Ammon, below) rallies the orphans to inspire everyone but the irascible Aggie Hannigan (Suzanne Burns, center) to enlighten their outlook.

The play that launched a generation of determined-looking little girls' singing fist-clenched versions of "Tomorrow" at musical theater auditions, *Annie* remains the pinnacle of female leads for a little girl.

No self-respecting preadolescent starlet can truly say she's ready to move on to Sondheim until she's carried a production of *Annie*. The title role is a musical Hamlet for little girls. Only the most precocious, grounded and gifted dare don "The Wig." When the whole shebang lives or dies by the bounce of your ruby red curls, you can betcher damn bottom dollar the wheat gets separated from the chaff in a big old hurry.

That said, I am pleased to announce that Hannah Ammon, the star of Monterey Peninsula College's current production of *Annie*, has risen to the challenge. She's got the chops, she's got the hops, she's got the pop. All in a particularly pint-size package.

The defining moment of her performance? When she's fighting to keep a dog from dragging her off stage left while delivering the all-important show-stopper "Tomorrow." Showing remarkable poise, Ammon kept a firm grip on the mutt's collar while still betchying her bottom dollar with exactly the kind of feel-good moxie which *The Wig* demands.

The live, unruly dog is a good metaphor for this whole production. It was a bold move by director Gary Bolen, which came perilously close to going horribly awry, yet worked wonderfully. And needless to say, directing a battery of young girls is a slippery slope.

"It took me precisely three minutes into my first blocking rehearsal with the girls to make one of them cry! I asked one of the smaller ones where her script was, and as she pointed to the aisle where she had left it before going on stage, she burst into tears. Apparently, I'm a scary, scary man!" Bolen explains.

In addition to the chorus of orphans, the adult cast is strong and contains some excellent performances. Highlights include Suzanne Burns as the alcoholic orphanage maven Aggie Hannigan, Howard Hinckley as a giant Daddy Warbucks, and Phyllis Davis as his unflappable aide Grace. As the two-bit swindler Rooster Harrigan, Peter Hoffman brings a fun, exhilarating performance that somehow evokes both Freddy Mercury and Ben Stiller. In addition, Andrew Schoenberg steals scenes as a radio announcer and a presidential advisor.

The ensemble also does triple duty in the first act, transforming themselves from homeless squatters to a high society wait staff to bustling New Yorkers. Tara Lucido, in particular, demonstrates she's got a pretty serious

voice.

Set designer Casey Kearns also deserves a big nod. It wasn't until the second act that I realized the colorful pillars which frame his fluid set were covered in individually pasted pages of old comic newsprint. Some of the set changes are so seamless they looked as if they were magically materializing and dematerializing. The scene transition to the streets of New York was particularly well-crafted.

Yet what surprised me most about *Annie* was its potent political undercurrents. Beneath the insanely catchy melodies and iconic characters lies a democratic message about social responsibility.

As a staunch Calvin Coolidge-quoting Republican, Warbucks (whose name, of course, implies that his empire was built with blood money) has nothing but contempt for Franklin Delano Roosevelt (conveyed effectively by James Brady), who conducts his ineffectual fireside chats as the country heaves and stomps its way through the dusty, hungry choreography of the Depression.

Little Orphan Annie represents the masses—the hungry, downtrodden, and disenfranchised American people. Infused with the eternal, manic optimism of a young country, *Annie* softens Warbucks and inspires the missile-silo-domed billionaire to ask a favor of FDR. With this bipartisan note struck, *Annie* inspires friendship between the war financier and the Democratic president and FDR's cabinet is inspired to create the New Deal, FDR's historic decision to rebuild the economy with a series of new federal projects.

It's no coincidence that this play became a big hit on Broadway in the late '70s, when Jimmy Carter was failing miserably at become the next FDR and the national economy was experiencing another slump. That said, with the economy presently in the dumper, *Annie* may be poised for a huge revival.

THE MPC THEATRE COMPANY PRESENTS *ANNIE* AT THE MORGAN STOCK STAGE THROUGH AUG. 28. THURSDAY'S PERFORMANCE BEGINS AT 7PM; FRIDAY AND SATURDAY PERFORMANCES BEGIN AT 8PM, AND SUNDAY'S MATINEE PERFORMANCE BEGINS AT 2PM. \$33/ADULTS; \$25/SENIORS (BOTH CATEGORIES \$18 IF ORDERED AT LEAST 24 HOURS IN ADVANCE); \$15/YOUTH; \$12/CHILDREN. 646-4212 OR WWW.TICKETGUYS.COM.

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