

Review: Anne of Green Gables musical a charming dose of Canadiana

Michael D. Reid / Times Colonist

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Gilbert Blythe (Rowan Wolfe) pulls on Anne's (Molly Lydon) pigtail in a scene from Anne of Green Gables.

Photograph By VERONICA BONDERUD PHOTOGRAPHY

REVIEW

What: Anne of Green Gables

Where: McPherson Playhouse

When: Until Dec. 3

Tickets: 250-386-6121, rmts.bc.ca

Rating: Three and a half stars (out of four)

What's not to love about Anne of Green Gables, especially during the home stretch of the 150th anniversary of Canada's confederation?

Sure, the 1965 musical inspired by Lucy Maud Montgomery's beloved 1908 novel about the escapades of Anne Shirley, the fiery, red-haired orphan who steals hearts in Avonlea, P.E.I., might seem dated and simplistic to the uninitiated. Yet it's those characteristics and a sense of endearing innocence that make this show as gosh-darn appealing as its motor-mouthed heroine.

In Victoria Operatic Society's production that opened Friday at the McPherson Playhouse, director-choreographer Tara Britt and her creative collaborators acknowledge this — that Anne of Green Gables would never be confused with Guys and Dolls, Chicago or other razzle-dazzle musicals of that

ilk. It is what it is — an unbridled, old-school dose of Canadiana — and on those terms this production succeeds nicely.

That said, musical-theatre geeks will surely detect moments reminiscent of other shows within this musical's creaky frames. *Did You Hear?*, in which the Avonlea townsfolk spread gossip, recalls to some extent the Pick-a-Little, Talk-a-Little number from *The Music Man*, for instance, and it's hard not to think of *Mary Poppins* when Frances Bitonti appears as Miss Stacy, the students' dreamy, inspiring new teacher.

Bitonti's radiance as this seemingly heaven-sent character is in stark contrast to her portrayal of Mrs. Blewett, the overworked, shrewish mother whose eagerness to adopt Anne recalls Annie's Miss Hannigan.

The VOS veteran's uplifting rendition of *Open the Window*, in which Miss Stacy introduces the hitherto oppressed pupils to a whole new world of adventure through field trips, is a notable highlight.

Particularly effective is a second-act reprise when she jazzes it up, giving the production's musical director Brad L'Ecuyer and his orchestra an opportunity to cut loose and make this number soar.

For someone who hasn't seen *Anne of Green Gables* since the 1970s, the new show brings the added pleasure of becoming reacquainted with songs long forgotten and lovingly revived by this talented company.

You'll feel it from the moment Molly Lydon confidently belts out that rousing paean to self-esteem, *Gee I'm Glad I'm No Else But Me*, to *If It Hadn't Been For Me*, the reflected-glory showstopper in which seemingly everyone in Avonlea tries to take credit for Anne's ultimate achievements. It's enough to make you want to run out and get a copy of the original Charlottetown Festival production's soundtrack.

Although neither as slight nor as young as her character, Lydon, 18, is a wonder as she embodies the loquacious, quick-tempered title character with carrot-coloured pigtails and a vivid imagination. The slender plot focuses on her adoption by aging farmer Matthew Cuthbert and his sister, Marilla, who initially thought they'd be adopting a boy, not a girl, to help them work their farm on Prince Edward Island.

Lydon's a triple-threat, effectively exuding this homeless drama queen's spunk and jaw-dropping candour, showcasing a singing voice both pure and powerful, and pulling off Britt's dance moves with apparent ease.

Other noteworthy examples of Britt's colourful staging include the picnic sequence, where the three-legged race and egg-and-spoon races stir memories of yesteryear, and the classic *Ice Cream* number.

Dan Costain, who appeared in the original, brings a folksy charm to his role as the shy bachelor and peacemaker whose paternal instincts are awakened when Anne shows up. The veteran song-and-dance man nicely showcases his baritone on Humble Pie and the title tune, and even dances a jig — an apparent reference to his career as a musical-theatre hooper.

Jo Barnes is suitably stern as Marilla, accrediting herself well on We Clearly Requested a Boy before gradually softening her stance and becoming more maternal.

Angelina Robertson engagingly portrays Diana Barry, Anne's newfound bosom buddy, with their tale of (young) female empowerment climaxing in their uplifting rendition of Kindred Spirits. Robertston is particularly amusing during the classic sequence in which her character inadvertantly knocks back several glasses of Marilla's homemade wine instead of raspberry cordial.

Other standouts include Rowan Wolfe as Gilbert Blythe, the smart, handsome classmate who teases Anne before becoming smitten, and Eva Bild, colourfully formidable as judgmental busybody Rachel Lynde.

Guy Chester's simple yet effective set design evoking the farmhouse interiors and schoolhouse is augmented by colourful projections that transport us to farmer's fields, forests and trails in turn-of-the-20th-century P.E.I.

The technical standout in this production, however, is the period costumes supplied by designers Lal O'Connor and Deb Cope.

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