

Review: 'Annie' at the Paramount Theatre

Tomorrow looking bright for 'Annie'

THEATER REVIEW: "Annie" at the Paramount Theatre in Aurora

★★★½

November 25, 2012|Chris Jones | Theater critic



Everyone's first "Annie" should be at a venerable venue like the Paramount Theatre in Aurora, which opened for [business](#)



in 1931, right when "Little Orphan Annie" mania was at its peak. The historic theater on the Fox River was built just one year after comic-strip Annie and her pooch, Sandy, got their own radio show, and one year before their adventures were filmed by RKO in what would be the first of three "Annie" movies. "Annie," the much-loved 1977 musical about the spunky orphan and Daddy Warbucks, her billionaire

benefactor, is actually set in New York in 1933. That means you can look at the art deco-style walls and ceiling of this great, far west suburban palace of varieties and drink in a very close match for the aesthetics of the family show currently occupying its stage.

Or, to put all this another way, "Annie" really matches this old joint.

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Rachel Rockwell's terrific new production of this justly beloved musical — Charles Strouse and Martin Charnin's fantastic score hath not a single dud therein, and Thomas Meehan's book is a masterpiece of character development and storytelling, nothing less — achieves much of what I thought James Lapine's disappointing current Broadway revival would achieve but does not. And when I say the Aurora "Annie" is, on balance, better than the current Broadway "Annie" (while charging less than half the New York prices) I am not relying on distant memory. I just saw the New York production a couple of weeks ago.

In Aurora, Rockwell removes some of the traditional treacle that gums up this piece. Thanks to designer Mike Tutaj's huge and magnificent Depression-era projections (which sit behind a shrewd and soaring unit-set from Linda Buchanan), we get a far greater sense of the despairing context to the optimistic heroine. Annie belts out her signature number, "Tomorrow," a runaway dwarfed by the dark horrors of the harsh streets, only for the dawn to slowly and subtly arrive behind her during her final chorus. There is no better way to frame a show that's about the power of optimism. In the central "N.Y.C." sequence, Rockwell shows us the opposite, affluent New York, as Warbucks (Gene Weygandt), Grace Farrell (Emily Rohm) and Annie (Caroline Heffernan) stroll down Fifth Avenue as a plethora of that city's icons float and dance around them on their way to the Roxy, which, in this production, is a massive, sepia-toned rendering of the actual Roxy at 153 W. 50th St. It is a magnificent piece of staging. On Broadway right now, they're walking past a few cheap-looking silhouettes.

"Annie" is a difficult show to stage with aesthetic unity: It has serious themes of social commentary as it moves around New York but also elements of a vaudeville plot, especially when Rooster (Jake Klinkhammer) and his sidekick Lily (Maggie Portman) try to kidnap the heroine. But Rockwell, Buchanan, Tutaj and lighting designer Greg Hofmann (whose work is key here) achieve a consistency of style far better than most "Annie" creative teams, who often end up falling between competing worlds.

In most reviews of this show, the girl in the title role is declared to be a discovery. Heffernan, whose performance as Scout in the superb Steppenwolf Theatre [Company](#)



production of "To Kill a Mockingbird" was among the best work I've ever seen from a kid, is already well-established. But who knew she could sing like this? Here, she brings the same spunk, charm,

vulnerability and everyday-gal quality to another great role. She knocks it out of the park, vocally, although it does sound like someone told her to sing the word "Tomorrow" like "Tarr'marra," a period, faux New York-ese that jars each time it leaves her lips, since she can't own it. Let Heffernan sing "Tomorrow" like a real girl, for goodness' sake. She does not need to sound like one of the "Newsies."

Christine Sherrill, who plays Miss Hannigan, also is hardly a newcomer. But here she continues what has been a progressive coming-out this past year or so as one of Chicago's leading women in musical comedy. The trick with Miss Hannigan is to make her nasty enough to fuel the plot and the comedy but vulnerable enough that we don't believe she really wanted to harm these girls — and could, in better economic circumstances and without her love of booze, been a real mother. That's exactly what the superb Sherrill delivers, pulling her character's energy and conflicts from the orphans, which is crucial, and then wailing out her big numbers, especially "Easy Street," with the fine support of Klinkhammer and Portman, who have just the right blend of arrested sensuality and sleaze.

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Rockwell does not put Heffernan in the traditional curly wig or the traditional red dress in the last few minutes — which was intended by the show's authors to show how the character morphs into the image familiar from the comic strip. That's fair enough — I'm sure the same choice was debated on Broadway — but it does compel a production to show us something remarkable in its place, given the way Little Orphan Annie's descent down the grand Warbucks staircase is built up in the musical's book. Rockwell falls down there; an ugly bow, obscuring half of Heffernan's face, does not cut it, and the last couple of scenes are by far the weakest and least secure of the entire production.

Weygandt has his own, very fine head of hair obscuring the traditional bald pate of his character. Fair enough, again — if you're nixing one traditional look in favor of a new deal, you might as well nix the other — but the production should have known this would become an elephant in the theater, and elephants in the theater need to be addressed. Meanwhile, Don Richard's FDR is a very broad FDR in a production that wants to escape that elsewhere. A show based on a cartoon that no longer wants to be a cartoon needs a purging of the remnants of its cartoonish elements.

I doubt much of that will bother you, though. When it comes to human fundamentals, vocal pleasures and rich emotional lives in every corner of the stage (for this is a singularly emotional piece of material),

this "Annie" is a very fine achievement. The veteran actress Glory Kessel shows up in a cameo as the cook and manages to imbue all of her moments with particular heart.

There is a full orchestra in the pit, the overture has survived and the orphans, especially a scene-stealing blonde named Ava Morse, are lovable and spectacularly mischievous. A local animal shelter is offering pets for rescue in the lobby and was doing excellent business Saturday night. "Annie," especially this "Annie," is the kind of show that makes you want to take any needy creature home for Christmas.

*Through Dec. 30 at the Paramount Theatre, 23 E. Galena Blvd.; 2 hours, 30 minutes; tickets: \$34.90-\$46.90 at 630-896-6666 or **ParamountAurora.com***