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Energy, charisma and emotion make 'Fiddler' enjoyable play

Last Saturday evening I had doubts about going to the Hult Center's Silva Concert Hall to see a lively play such as "Fiddler on the Roof" when I was in a downhearted, depressed mood. The fact that musicals are just about my least favorite form of theater didn't help the situation.

Nonetheless, I strove to set my worries and preferences aside and go to the Eugene Festival of Musical Theater's second production ready for an entertaining performance that would hopefully equal or possibly surpass the festival's first presentation of "Peter Pan" last summer.

And when the houselights dimmed and Arnie Laferty took center stage with his heartwarming portrayal as Tevye, a poor Russian dairyman, my hopes were ignited and all my cares seemed to vanish. I forgot my aversion toward musicals as I became diverted by the sheer enjoyment of excellent musical theater.

Laferty's performance brims with charisma as he guides the audience through the comic dilemma of Tevye trying to choose husbands for his five daughters. "Tradition" in the small Russian village of Anatekva during the eve of the revolutionary period in 1905 calls for fathers making the final decisions on matchmaking in the household.

But Tevye's daughters are spunky with minds of their own and, under all his bravado, he's just an old softy trying to keep his offspring happy and his nagging wife Golde, played by Marie Siegel, out of his hair.

The fact that Golde won't let him forget he's a poor man unable to provide a dowry for his daughters complicates his predicament. Siegel's strong, biting performance is the perfect foil for Laferty's witty charm.

Together, they carry the rest of the enormous cast through the play's delightful songs and dances with seemingly endless energy. Their vitality on stage keeps the pace of the production upbeat along with the help of Nathan Cammack's flawless musical direction.

Nicola Foster's choreographic skills are visably apparent in her reproduction of the dance moves from the original "Fiddler" directed and choreographed by Jerome Robbins for New York Stage. The dances are smooth and clean, particularly during the musical number "To Life," in which Tevye and his friends dance in classic

Russian style at the "The Inn," which is restricted to women of course.

However, any lively performance presented by an energetic cast runs the risk of moving too fast at times, and this production is not without its flaws in this respect.

It becomes particularly apparent in the dream scene in which the stage is filled with what looks to be the whole cast acting out a nightmare created by Tevye to trick his wife. Although visually the scene is spectacular, there is just too much disjointed activity going on at once to comprehend simultaneously.

Also, when a cast sets a quick pace at the onset of a performance, it is difficult to carry the momentum throughout the production. The fact that "Fiddler" is a three-hour performance makes it all the harder to maintain a steady speed.

Although the performance seems to move by quickly during the first 95 minutes prior to a 20-minute intermission, the play noticeably loses momentum during the last 65 minutes as the plot and pace slowly unravel to a slightly disappointing conclusion.

Although Director Ed Ragazzino is unquestionably a talented professional in the world of musical theater, he may have been better off splitting the production into three parts with two short intermissions to give the production better continuity.

However, all in all "Fiddler on the Roof" is a delightful production full of good old-fashioned humor and wonderful surprises. Special praises should go to Scenic Designer Jerry Williams, for his clever set construction. His ingenious puzzle design of Tevye's house, complete with movable interior parts, makes transitions between the play's several scenes barely noticeable.

For a carefree evening that will revive the spirits of even the most downhearted souls, "Fiddler on the Roof" is a must. The production continues through Aug. 13 with performances on Tuesdays and Wednesdays at 6:30 p.m., Thursdays through Saturdays at 8 p.m. and 2:30 Sunday matinees. There will be a final performance on Tuesday, Aug. 13 at 8 p.m. Tickets are available at the Hult Center with prices ranging from \$6 to \$16.50.

By Sheila Landry



Jonathan Wilson, playing the fiddler, and Arnie Laferty, starring as Tevye, give energetic performances in "Fiddler on the Roof."

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