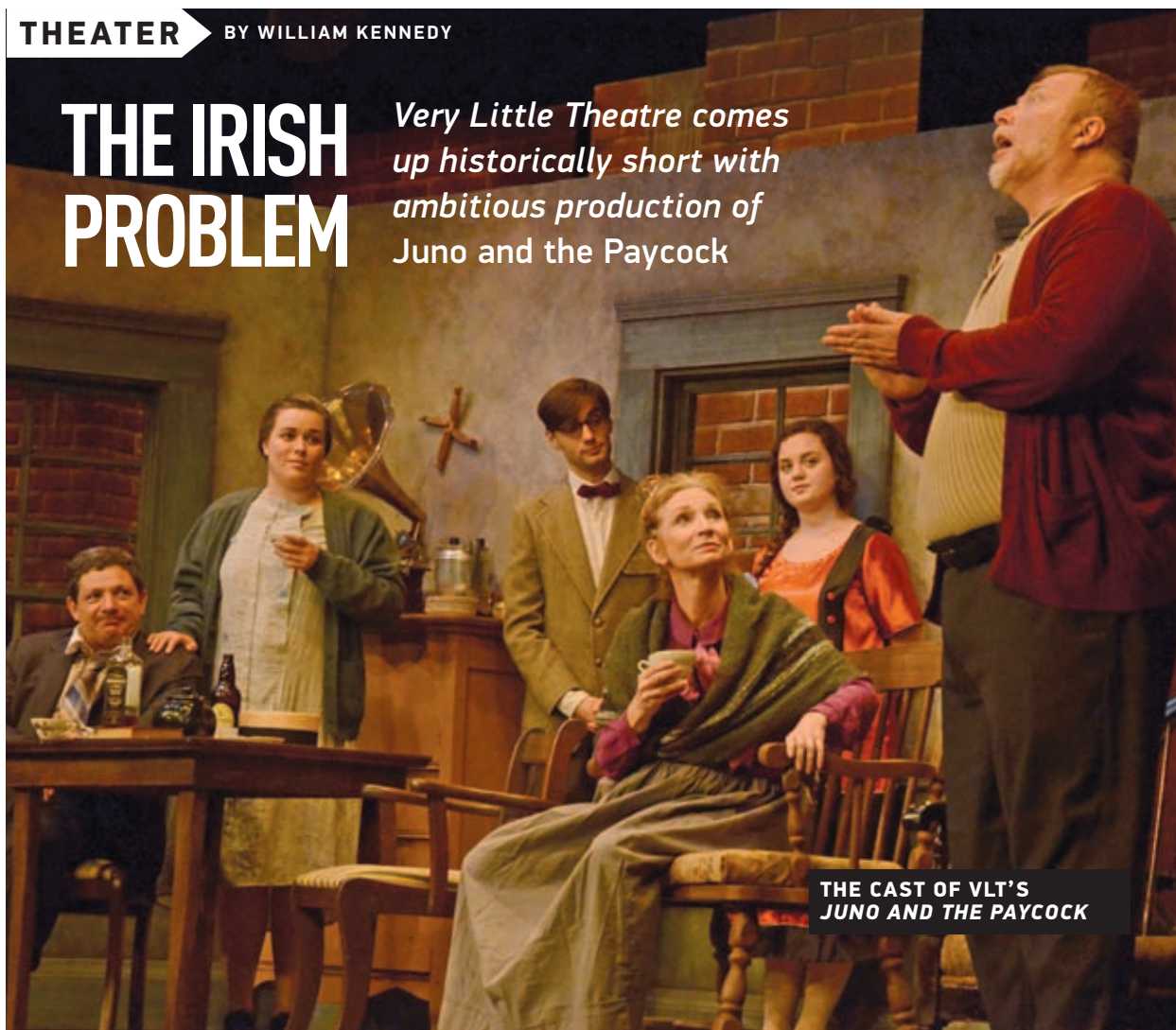


THE IRISH PROBLEM

Very Little Theatre comes up historically short with ambitious production of Juno and the Paycock



THE CAST OF VLT'S JUNO AND THE PAYCOCK

Although I'm aware that conflicts of one kind or another have rocked Ireland for centuries, my knowledge of early 20th-century Irish history is admittedly, and perhaps regrettably, patchy, and I'm going to go ahead and wager that, in 2016, it is for most people.

And this is a hindrance for Very Little Theatre's current production of Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*, on now under the direction of Michael Walker.

Textually, the play — set in 1922 and premiering in 1924 — assumes the political context of the story is front and center for its audience. And VLT's production, though earnest and well intentioned, misses opportunities that do exist within the text of the play to refresh or inform us. The Irish Free State was established in 1922 under the Anglo-Irish treaty, ending the three-year Irish War of Independence. This storyline is effectively buried.

Without clarity on these reference points, the woe-filled tragedy of the Boyle family lacks the impact it could have or was meant to have by O'Casey — Irish stereotypes set adrift without moorings.

The Boyles are achingly poor, thoroughly Irish in their predilection for drink, song and religion, and they are presented with salvation in the form of an inheritance, only to have it snatched away on a technicality.

In the midst of the 2016 presidential election, the plight of poor people (the 99 percent, if you will) is

on people's minds, and many more chances are missed to bring contemporary relevance to the show — the choice between no work and work that will kill you, politics that have abandoned you, misplaced and misguided nationalism, and regular folks gunned down in the street.

That could be Ireland 1922 or United States 2016. I wanted to feel that.

Juno and the Paycock is ambitious for VLT for many reasons, including the Irish accents. I'm uneasy about any theatrical production, professional or not, attempting to replicate any kind of accent. They're tough. The play also has a large, unwieldy cast, complex politics and a dense text that hasn't aged particularly well for modern audiences.

VLT's show is overall capable, admirable and often entertaining. A highlight comes from Adrian Lawler in the role of Johnny Boyle, an injured veteran of his country's ongoing conflict and suffering what we now understand to be PTSD.

In the play program, Lawler explains that his ancestors fought in the skirmishes referenced in the play. He himself immigrated to the United States in 2008 after Ireland's economy crashed, and has never before acted in a play. During the play my mother, who accompanied me, leaned over and whispered, "He seems so real." Indeed she was right. ■

Juno and the Paycock continues through Oct. 22 at Very Little Theatre; \$15-\$19, tickets at thevlt.com or 541-344-7751.

THE MUSIC AND THE MIRROR

Cottage Theatre delivers a triple threat with strong production of A Chorus Line

If you could peer into this critic's embryonic soul, I suspect you'd find *A Chorus Line* lyrics.

I wore grooves into my album of the original cast recording as a kid, and heck, my supercool local public elementary school put it on as a fabulous bootleg production, minus the racier numbers, when I was in second grade. Over the years, I've probably seen it 25 times, from multiple national tours to Broadway.

In other words, I know this show.

And because it's one of my favorites, I was a little skeptical about a community theater production. After all, *Chorus Line* demands the "triple threat," or performers who are equally strong actors, singers and dancers.

But the show is about more than technique. It's the story — the backstory — of how people make their way into the arts and into dance, and what it takes for them to persevere.

And here, director Lanny Mitchell delivers in Cottage Theatre's production of *A Chorus Line*.

Clocking in at two hours with no intermission, the piece is emotionally strong, with believable characterization and warm, relatable exchanges.

Mitchell humanizes Zach, the proverbially aloof director, modernizing the 1975 Michael Bennett original.

Autumn Carter as Diana Morales shines with confidence and a powerful voice. Ryan Dallimor, Joel Ibanez, Stephani Anderson and Kathryn Pearson provide laughs.

Nicole Garibay as Bebe milks every moment — a real pleasure to watch — and Heidi Turnquist has fun as Val.

Jessica Rossi as Maggie impresses with her clear and compelling sound.

As Paul, Kory Weimer brings depth and openness to his character, nailing a tough monologue in the second act.

They say you can't out-kitten kittens, but Marcee Long as Sheila and Janet Rust as Cassie give it all they've got. Cassie is an especially challenging role — one that calls for top-of-your-game acting, singing and, most importantly, standout dancing. Rust's strength is in her accessible connection with the audience, a rapport that allows us to look past technical flaws.

And we would be remiss if we didn't point out the obvious: As much as he tries to tone it down, Rafael Batya as Mike clearly dances circles around everyone. Still in high school, Batya's bio reflects his dedication to dance study. It shows.

Mitchell's choreography is lively and doable, and the cast sells it throughout.

Under musical direction by Mark VanBeever, the live band sounds tight and balanced. Costumes by Rhonda Turnquist add vintage flair, and Amanda Ferguson's lighting supports shifts in mood and dynamic change. — *Rachael Carnes*

A Chorus Line continues through Oct. 30 at the Cottage Theatre; \$20-\$25, tickets at cottagetheatre.org or 541-942-8001.

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