

Berlin songs and a wonderfully sappy plot. Based on the hit 1954 movie of the same name, the 2004 stage adaptation wraps a conventional romantic comedy around a feel-good story of leadership and loyalty.

When the lights come up, it's Christmas Eve 1944, and the beleaguered men of the 151st Division are enjoying a moment of holiday cheer amid Europe's wartime chaos. Two song and dance men, Capt. Bob Wallace (Ward Fairbairn) and Cpl. Phil Davis (Eric Blanchard), are singing Berlin's 1942 hit "White Christmas" when they're gruffly interrupted by Gen. Henry Waverly (Matthew Leach), who chastises them, tongue in cheek, for being out of uniform, then notes, sadly, he's heading back stateside for a medical retirement.

The next thing we know it's 1954 in New York. Wallace and Davis, now a top act on the Ed Sullivan show, encounter an aspiring sister act, Betty Haynes (Lynnea Barry) and Judy Haynes (Cyra Conforth). Romantic scheming brings all four singers to rural Vermont, where they find that a cardigan-wearing Gen. Waverly owns a winter resort that's about to succumb to bad weather and worse management.

All that's needed to save the general and his inn is a Christmas performance by Wallace and Davis and a command reunion of the 151st.

The stage version of *White Christmas* has challenges. Who can compete with Bing Crosby and Danny Kaye? The show is not an integrated musical, with songs advancing the plot. Instead, it's a back-stage musical revue closer to *42nd Street*, with its manic Busby Berkeley energy, than to *Oklahoma!*

Never fear. That sheer manic humor blossoms here under direction by Ron Daum and smart choreography by Caitlin Christopher. Robert Ashens, as music director and conductor of the live orchestra, doesn't miss a beat.

Fairbairn's Capt. Wallace, with the good-natured, padded-shoulder presence of a Ronald Reagan, offers a straight man to Blanchard's wily schemes, and Conforth and Barry make for a sweet sister act.

A dazzling turn near the show's end comes from Sheldon High School freshman Johanna Gilbert, playing Waverly's granddaughter Susan, when she launches into "Let Me Sing and I'm Happy."

Buy yourself a present, and go enjoy some holiday warmth. — *Bob Keefer*

Miss Bennet: Christmas at Pemberley

AT OREGON CONTEMPORARY THEATRE
THROUGH DEC. 16

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a theater audience desiring a romantic comedy of manners during the holiday season must be in want of some Jane Austen.

Written with verve and charm by Lauren Gunderson and Margot Melcon, *Miss Bennet: Christmas at Pemberley* is a stage adaptation that picks up a few years after the conclusion of simply everyone's favorite novel, *Pride and Prejudice*.

Set during the holidays at the estate of the dreamy Darcy (Andrew Black) and his wife, the iconically indomitable Lizzie (Melanie Moser), the play focuses not on this perfectly matched couple but on the sole unmarried (and unmarriedable?) Bennet sister, the wry and bookish Mary, played to perfection by Sabrina Gross.

The story recapitulates Austen's classic, though with some lovely twists on the themes of burgeoning romance and its potential thwarting due to class entanglements, failed communication and personal rivalries — in short, the trademark stuff of romantic comedy, which Austen all but invented. The playwrights are keen on upholding the high-brow humor and embattled politesse of Austen, while winking slyly to modern audiences, all without losing an ounce of the smart sexual politics that give the original such a timeless appeal.

Mary's lonely but furiously self-contained existence receives an unexpected gust of turbulence with the arrival of Arthur (Joseph Workman), a bachelor who's recently inherited an estate of considerable standing. Similarly nerdy, for lack of a better term, Arthur is intrigued by Mary, with whom he shares a fondness for scientific treatises and daydreams of world travel.

Their courtship is tentative, bashful and completely sweet. And, of course, it wouldn't be a bit of Austen-inspired fun if it weren't also complicated, largely by family ties and untoward obligations. At Pemberley, it takes a village to raise a romance: sister Jane (Erica Towe) and her husband Bingley (Matt Holland), expecting their first child; the unrepentant flirt Lydia (Janelle Rae), who focuses her heat on Arthur; and, of course, the devilish Anne (Lindsey Esch), who single-handedly decides she and Arthur are to be wed in order to preserve her share of the inheritance.

It's all so much fun, with just the right combination of warmth, wit and sensuality. The cast is fantastic, and director Elizabeth Helman brings Austen's world alive with economy, taste and a strong feel for those underlying tensions that can explode in moments of high-brow silliness or heartwarming woo. And never has a Christmas tree — inside a manor, no less! — been revealed for the exotic contrivance it is.

With so much crass commercialization dominating the yuletide, Oregon Contemporary Theatre's production of *Miss Bennet* gives the holidays back to the holidays, by finding humanity in the heart of tradition and revealing the real relationships that can make this time of year a true joy. — *Rick Levin*

Don't miss Eugene Weekly's look at local children's theater programs in our upcoming Dec. 20 issue.



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