

‘Annie’ astonishes with yuletide joy

‘Annie’ Review

By BURNLEY GARELICK

Christmas comes early this year when a girl who believes in tomorrow gathers her new family around the Christmas tree to celebrate a future brimming with joy.

That’s no spoiler. Everybody knows “Annie” the musical has a happy ending. The resilient orphan who never gives up is our talisman in these times of terror and political turmoil.

To that end, we can’t help but applaud the Last Resort Players’ production of “Annie” playing at the Florence Events Center this weekend and next.

W.C. Fields, that comic curmudgeon, said that anyone who hates children and dogs can’t be all bad. But Fields hadn’t been charmed by Annie and her faithful canine, Sandy. Elyse Stewart as the red-haired moppet is a pure delight, an animated pixie that shines with wit, ingenuity and a big voice that’s all heart.

And Sandy, played by Trudy Pinnock, a cattle collie and acclaimed fine artist, takes the stage with aplomb and knows her way around a curtain call.

Before “Annie” became a smash hit in Florence, it was “Little Orphan Annie,” a popular comic strip that ran from 1924 to 2010 and had more fans than “Popeye,” “Dick Tracy,” “Li’l Abner” and “Blondie.” After its cartoonist Harold Gray died in 1968, the strip was drawn by others and gained momentum when the Broadway musical opened in 1977 to run for six years.

Annie’s story is endearing because it portrays the triumph of the underdog — the persevering and plucky orphan, much like the characters of Charles Dickens — Oliver Twist, David Copperfield and Little Dorrit — that inspired Gray. The strip’s title came from the 1885 poem by James Whitcomb Riley, the one that ends with the goblins getting you if you don’t watch out.

While most comic strip heroes were boys, Gray had the genius to make his hero a girl. We all know girl power rules — or ought to!

Gray’s comic strip was so popular it spawned a knock-off in 1927, “Little Annie Rooney” and her dog Zero. This title came from an 1890 song by Michael Nolan that played English music halls and came to the United States by singer Annie Hart for an 1895 show, “The Bowery Girl.”

For an orphan, Annie comes with a lot of baggage, but the LRP actors wear it all well and play the show with expertise, gusto and great affection that radiates through the theater.

The story takes place in 1933 during the Great Depression, and wonderful ragtag costumes capture the scene while black and white backdrops of old New York set the time. Simple, evocative staging includes the Hooverville breadline — President Hoover, who preceded Roosevelt, had a real talent for rallying aid to disaster victims — and the colorful Warbucks mansion with staircase and paintings.

An elegant old-fashioned wicker wheelchair transports FDR (Jay Cable) to his Cabinet meeting.

The giggling orphan girls are a whirlwind of spunk and exuberance flowing over melody and harmony for a spirited performance in a “Hard-Luck Life.”

Their guardian, Miss Hannigan, shrieks with displeasure in a hilarious performance by Sabrina Hand. Hannigan is the

wicked witch who listens to radio soaps (“Helen Trent” and “Ma Perkins”), takes medicinal slurps from her flask, and yearns for escape.

Her gangster brother Rooster (Jake Landers) and his ditsy girlfriend Lily St. Regis (Kary Keppol) offer her salvation on Easy Street, at the expense of Annie. Landers displays an intoxicating voice and a swinging style, as though he stepped out of “Guys & Dolls.”

Perhaps the loveliest vocalist is Joanie Schmidt as the aptly named Grace, Warbucks’ long-suffering secretary and Annie’s greatest ally. Jim Erickson as billionaire Oliver Warbucks rises to his character’s prominence with a heartfelt solo, “Something Was Missing.”

Who’s your Daddy now! The LRP actors are accompanied by a very fine live orchestra under the astute direction of Chris Lewis.

Cheers to director Jennifer Connor and her extraordinarily capable crew for a smashing production of “Annie.”

Gloriosky and Leapin’ Lizards! Not only is it a New Deal, it’s a good deal, and you’re gonna like it here. Go see “Annie” today, tomorrow, or any of the tomorrows to come.

The show plays Nov. 4, 5, 10, 11 and 12.

For more information, call the FEC at 541-997-1994 or go to eventcenter.org.

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