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## 'Cheaper' is old-fashioned charmer

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It's a throwback to an innocent, old-fashioned time that is positively quaint by today's standards.

A time when a 16-year-old had to beg to wear silk stockings. Or had to have her brother around as a chaperone on dates.

"Cheaper by the Dozen," which opened Friday on the Omaha Community Playhouse's main stage, immerses us in the home life of a family with 12 children, circa 1924. Its patriarch is an industrial efficiency expert who studies repetitive motion to eliminate waste and save time.

This true-life story became a best-selling book in 1948 and a hit movie in 1950. Frank and Lillian Gilbreth of Montclair, N.J., really did apply those efficiency methods to running their household and raising their impressive brood.

The playhouse gets a lot right in this stage version, penned in 1970. But Christopher Sergel's script lacks the consistent comedic zing of the movie version, as well as a crackling tension between Frank (starchy fussbudget Clifton Webb in the movie) and the rest of the world, which tried his thin patience at every turn.

As played by Ron Chvala, Frank is a nicer guy — a kinder, gentler, more benevolent dictator whose rough edges are softened by his pleasant, cheerful wife (Dawn Buller-Kirke).

Oldest daughter Anne's crisis over dating rules, and her clash with a mean-spirited school testing supervisor (Virginia Kincaid) are the closest Sergel comes to whipping up dramatic conflict.

Other fun anecdotes fall to a couple of the older children to tell. Ernestine and Frank Jr. (Brittany Locke, Zachary Trail) do a fine job as narrators setting up scenes. But hearing is not as funny as seeing, which a movie can more easily do when it's not limited to the living room.

Entire segments of the movie that played well are missing here — most notably, Frank's decision to have all his children's tonsils out while he studied the doctor's motions.

But it's easy to find good things to say about what was included, starting with the period flavor of the piece.

Jim Othuse's rich detailing on the Gilbreth home — wide crown molding, paneled sweeping stair, etched glass in the front door — is a pleasure to drink in. Georgiann Regan's costumes — knee stockings, low-waist dresses, a big old motherly apron, sailor collars — also go a long way to evoking the times.

The kids are a knockout, from top to bottom of the staircase line. Personal favorites: Danny Dooling as smart-aleck chaperone Bill, Emma Garfoot as tiny Jane, Ian Hill as bespectacled Jackie and Brock McCullough as bright-eyed Dan. Logan Vamosi and Colin Ferguson provide humor as suitors to sweet, anxious Anne (Britta Tollefsrud).

Director Judith Hart keeps things moving briskly and makes the most of this soft, sentimental material. In telling a gentle, old-fashioned family story, "Cheaper by the Dozen" provides just that — a gentle, old-fashioned family show that's more of a charmer than a howler.

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