

Published Aug 22, 2009

Published Saturday August 22, 2009

Riches, warmth unfold in 'Quilters'

By Bob Fischbach

WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER



"Grandmother's Flower Garden" is a 1930s quilt. Seventeen pieces have been made for the performance of the Omaha Community Playhouse's "Quilters," and a quilt exhibit is on display during the musical.

"Quilters," a musical about pioneer women told through the quilts they sew, opened the Omaha Community Playhouse's 85th season Friday on a tuneful, tender note.

The production is rich with emotion in the stories of Sarah and her daughters, rich with voices blended in lush harmonies, rich with eye-popping color and artistry in dozens of quilts, rich with nine talented actresses who take turns in the spotlight.

If that weren't enough to admire, lead actress Judy Radcliff gave a strong, confident performance as Sarah after just four days of rehearsal. Kim Jubenville, sidelined by emergency surgery, hopes to return to the role later in the run.

At a Thursday night preview, a warm and engaging first act gave way to increasingly powerful drama in Act 2 as the ladies described miscarriages and a prairie fire, broken hearts and home building.

Like a quilt, the show's pieces accumulate and unfold into something strong and beautiful as the night moves on. Each story connects to a quilt pattern, and all the patterns combine to form a stunning legacy quilt that is nearly 13 feet square.

Sally Neumann Scamfer describes the man who got away, Bailey Carlson learns she's adopted, Jennifer Gilg sings of a grand house.

Girls move from playground to courting, birthing to dying, and as the memories roll, you can feel the audience connect and soften.

It's a true ensemble effort. Kicking off with a lively dance on a plain plank floor, the women pour onto the stage in their long cotton dresses and high-button shoes behind country fiddler Michael Frey.

They all stay onstage nearly all night long, moving a bench here, a trunk or stool there. Simple props are all the scenery needed. Trees, clouds or a windmill are projected onto a plain white backdrop of wood-framed squares.

A wave of standout ballads and hymns made Act 2 fairly explode with feeling. Music director John Bennett creates a capella magic on numbers such as "Land Where We'll Never Grow Old" and "Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow."

Musical moods shift from mournful ("The Butterfly") to exuberant ("Every Log in My House"), wistful ("Who Will Count the Stitches") to determined ("Dandelion"). Choreographer Kathy Wheeldon provides clever movement to match.

In what appears as homespun simplicity, "Quilters" deceives. Director Susan Baer Collins pulls music and movement, storytelling and craft together into something greater than its parts, celebrating the history of the plains in these tough and tender women.

Contact the writer:

444-1269, bob.fischbach@owh.com

Copyright ©2009 Omaha World-Herald®. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten, displayed or redistributed for any purpose without permission from the Omaha World-Herald.