

Community News

Review: Hillbarn Theatre's production of 'Newsies' is a crowd pleaser



From left, Zachary Isen, Tony Woodridge and Ethan Dea dance in the current Hillbarn Theatre production of "Newsies" in Foster City. (Photo by Mark Kitaoka)

By **JOANNE ENGELHARDT** | For The Daily News

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There's something incredibly special about the Hillbarn Theatre production of "Newsies," a musical that started out as a 1992 Disney movie that's based on the real-life story of beleaguered New York City newsboys at the turn of the 20th century.

Though there's nary a word about Christmas, Hillbarn nevertheless offers up a beautifully wrapped concoction of fantastic choreography, dynamic dancers and crystal-clear, youthful male voices who will bring you both comfort and joy.

Credit Zoe Swenson-Graham and a passel of high-energy, multi-talented dancers for making this version of "Newsies" abundantly entertaining and one that moves along for all of the 2 1/2 hours it runs. It's enough just to watch this many young men (and one female) do back flips, somersaults, pirouettes, kicks and cartwheels with abandon.

Although the movie version was widely considered a dud, the Alan Menken, Harvey Fierstein, Jack Feldman theatrical production ran for more than 1,000 performances on Broadway in 2012 and was nominated for eight Tony awards, winning two.

At Hillbarn, despite an overly loud, recorded sound track and negligible set design, this "Newsies" zings.

Some of the credit goes to the two youthful leads, Kamren Mahaney as the ringleader of the newsies, Jack Kelly, and a strong Melissa Momboisse as journalist (and Kelly's love interest), Katherine Plumber. But there's also a large tier of actor-dancers who add dimension and vigor to Hillbarn's production:

-An affecting Stephen Kanaski who obviously learned how to use a crutch (and even dance a few steps with it) as Jack's best friend Crutchie;

-Tony Wooldridge as Romeo, a cocky, self-assured newsie who exhibits terrific dancing skills (he's frequently one of a trio of highly gifted dancers doing three-turn spins);

-James Jones makes Davey a firebrand newsie who, with his little brother Les, are the only two who actually live in a home with their dad who was injured on the job and is now unable to work;

-Noah Itzkovitz as Davey's brother. Although only in middle school, Itzkovitz is already a forceful singer and dancer;

-Zachary Isen who's effective and explosive as another of the top-tier featured dancers;

–Jacob Fishman stands out with his stock of unruly blonde hair, wide smile and fine voice.

With a strong voice and good stage presence, Phaedra Tillery makes Medda Larkin memorable as Jack’s adult friend and mentor.

As Joseph Pulitzer, Shaun Leslie Thomas seems unsure of himself in Act 1, but comes around in Act 2 and sings a commanding rendition of the song, “The Bottom Line.”

There really are few missteps here with casting, thanks to director Doug Greer. Unfortunately, Grant Huberty’s sound sometimes means a vocalist can’t be heard over the too-loud sound track. And Paulino Deleal’s scenic design is minimalistic, perhaps because most of the stage needs to be clear for all the dancers to perform. Still, it was puzzling to see laundry hanging completely across the second-tier of the set but never used or changed throughout the show.

One prop, however, is such a lot of fun to watch that properties designer Michelle Morales deserves a shout-out. The old printing press hidden away in the basement of Pulitzer’s newspaper building is a sight to behold as it churns out a special “Newsies Edition” of the news.

As for the plot, it’s pretty much “underdog fights the establishment and comes out on top” – a scenario guaranteed to make people feel good. The mean ol’ Joseph Pulitzer decides to cut his costs at his paper, the New York World, by charging his newsies more to buy the papers they sell.

Those are words guaranteed to start a union! Pam Lampkin’s costumes are fine, particular the ones for the women (the gowns for Tillery’s vaudevillian theater owner are colorful and bouffant) and Momboisse’s Katherine. It must have been a costume challenge to come up with so many urban urchin outfits – especially ones that hold up to the energetic dancing required here.

Although many of the Feldman-Menken songs are forgettable, several stand out and are the standard ones associated with “Newsies.” The best are “Watch What Happens” (sung by Momboisse), and the newsies’ two anthems, “The World Will Know” and “Seize the Day.” The romantic duet sung by Jack and Katherine, “Something to Believe In,” is tender and sweet.

Judging by the opening night audience, Hillbarn definitely has a holiday hit on its hands without a trace of mistletoe or Santa.

What: "Newsies"

Where: Hillbarn Theatre, 1285 East Hillsdale Blvd., Foster City

When: Thurs. – Sat., 8 p.m., Sat. & Sun., 2 p.m.

Through: Dec. 22

Tickets: \$30-60, (650) 349-6411 or www.hillbarntheatre.org

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