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Review: Don't wait 'til 'Tomorrow,' see Theatre Aspen's 'Annie' ASAP

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Julia Foran, left, stars in the title role in Theatre Aspen's production of the musical "Annie," with Sophie Schlosser as Molly.

Stewart Oksenhorn / The Aspen Times

"Annie"

Where: Theatre Aspen in Rio Grande Park

When: 6:30 p.m. Thursday, with additional performances through Aug. 20.

ASPEN — While Theatre Aspen's venue renovation includes a new tent and more backstage space (both completed), and a new lobby and grounds (both in the works), left out of the plans was an expansion in the seating capacity. Which might turn out to be a mistake. Given how popular I expect their production of the musical "Annie" to be, maybe the first order of business should have been squeezing a few dozen more seats into the tent.

"Annie" played Thursday to a full, opening-night house, and it's easy to see many repeats of that exuberant atmosphere over the summer. "Annie," of course, was a near sure thing to begin with. Not only are the title, the story, and the songs "Tomorrow" and "It's the Hard-Knock Life" familiar even to those who haven't spent time trekking up and down Broadway, but so is the sentiment behind it all. "Annie" is the most heartwarming of tales — the scruffy orphan who authentically charms her

way to a better station. The production is, thanks to the tent upgrades, the biggest production in terms of cast and sets in Theatre Aspen history, and on opening night, the simple size of the show in this intimate space made it feel like a genuine treat — akin to seeing B.B. King at Belly Up. The cast features a bunch of local young actors, a sure way to garner attention.

Even with all those built-in advantages, the show still has to deliver, and “Annie” does so, emphatically, starting with the one-two punch of Nina Gabianelli and Julia Foran. The former gave a loud, showy, gloriously over the top performance, while the latter turned in grounded, solid, mature work — which is all the more delightful given that Gabianelli is the adult, playing the petty, mean orphanage keeper Miss Hannigan, while Foran is the 13-year-old in the title role. Both were remarkable performances on their own; the two juxtaposed struck a beautiful balance that crystallized the show’s messages of optimism and generosity.

Gabianelli and Foran were both drawn from the pool of Aspen-area talent — as were Franz Alderfer, who played a handful of roles and turned up the fun factor a notch every time he stepped onstage; and the contingent of girls who played the orphans on the level of a touring production, rather than on the community theater scale. Of the out-of-town talent, the standout was David Hess, who shined as the wealthy industrialist Oliver Warbucks.

Shining from behind the scenes was director and choreographer Marjorie Mae Treger, who filled the stage with energy and cohesion. Even on opening night, the actors, and the overall production, slipped right into place.

There are 21 performances of “Annie” left; audience capacity in the tent is 189. Meaning there are 3,969 seats to be filled over the course of the run (assuming Theatre Aspen doesn’t do a last-minute expansion). You have been notified.

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