

REVIEW: Mill Town Players Wage Action, Laughs in Madcap ‘Robin Hood’

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Photo by Wallace Krebs

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DRAMA CRITIC & PUBLISHER

When five young transients in ragged clothes invade the aisles of the Pelzer Auditorium begging for money and rummaging through a garbage can for food, one almost expects these downtrodden kids to break into “We Are the World” or the anthem “Do You Hear the People Sing” from “Les Miserables.”

There is indeed fine instrumental music in the Mill Town Players’ latest offering “Robin Hood,” but that is just the prelude and entertaining score for these starving denizens who morph effortlessly into that mythical tale about the highly-skilled archer in green who robs from the rich and gives to the poor.

“Robin Hood” by Greg Banks — who has fashioned a successful career of adapting classics like “Huck Finn,” “Pinocchio” and “Antigone” to stage plays for young audiences — is presented in the frenetic style of “The 39 Steps” and “The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged)” with a handful of actors playing all of the roles.

This action-packed adventure takes place in an abandoned graffiti-laden vaudeville theatre with an ornate, arched proscenium adorned with decorative molding. This set is another stellar design by Artistic Director Will Ragland and boasts a semi-circle extension to the main stage lined with exquisite cast-metal footlights and made possible by removing the first couple rows of seating.

Clemson student Drew Whitley plays our mysterious hero (and other minor characters) who has a clandestine compound in the middle of Sherwood Forest and roams the countryside with his band of Merry Men performing good deeds and saving those in distress like Maid Marian (Cara Ann Hendsbee). Though as it turns out, Marian can usually take care of herself; whether she’s flaunting her expertise in archery or raising her leg to flatulate on her adversary.

Clearly the tone of this “Robin Hood” is infinitely more akin to Mel Brooks’ “Robin Hood: Men in Tights” parody of the Medieval tale with jokes that whiz by faster than a speeding arrow and the madcap antics by the cast members who use everyday items they find in the theatre as props (like a coat hanger as a bow) to tell the story of the former nobleman whose family’s estate was seized by the evil Prince John (Aaron Pennington).

And Whitley, whose feathered pointy hat is the only semblance of the typical costume in common lore, is at his jocular best when he is in disguise: as a flirty hangman (actually hangwoman) who tricks the villainous but dimwitted Sheriff of Nottingham (an affable Noah George) or as an old man (with a mop as a beard) in an archery competition. Whitley gives a fierce performance here and embraces his character's compassion and humanity even when he sings a hilarious punk rock song or is victorious in a duel with brooms as swords.

Hendsbee adeptly plays the female lead with charm and ease, in addition to Much the Miller's Son, wearing a festive pinwheel hat. And she narrates most of the tale though the narration also bounces among other actors. George is a terrific inept law man and plays the fool quite well, especially in those retro Groucho Marx glasses and when he tries to marry Marian.

Michael Lewis, who starred as Danny in the company's sold-out run of "Grease" this summer, is Muso the street musician and occasional commentator that awes us with his acoustic guitar work in the play's opening and provides musical accompaniment throughout the show. He strums ditties like the "Mission Impossible" theme, the melody from Rossini's "William Tell Overture," dramatic music for some of the tense scenes and even sound effects on his upper frets. Nice work, Mr. Lewis.

The entire cast has verve and dexterity, but Pennington may give the most impressive comedic performance here probably because he wears the most hats, thus displaying a breadth of distinct zany characterizations. He plays most of the outlaws including Friar Tuck, Little John and Will Scarlett and does a fantastic Scottish accent and a John Wayne strut. And as Prince John, he is hysterical in his pageant sash and girlie crown, wheelchair and makeshift bathtub replete with rubber ducky. Pennington made a splash as Roger in "Grease" and audiences are sure to embrace him in "Robin Hood."

Jay Briggs, who helmed the company's "Treasure Island" last spring, directs this production and cleverly allows the actors to demonstrate their strengths at warp speeds with a wee bit of improvisation and a lot of audience participation, including a sack race and prompted chants. He keeps the plot beats and pacing fluid and the dramatic moments serious, but always within a sword's length (or in this instance, a broom) of deliberate and playful pandemonium.

Wylder Cooper has created subtle lighting for much of the show but there are some striking reds or blues in appropriately-measured doses, an arresting floor spotlight for the aisle scenes and an outstanding ending with the five merry pranksters standing in triumph as the footlights cast them as towering superheroes like the Avengers or the Justice League.

Scenic artist Abby Brown is responsible for much of the tagging on the set and a forest backdrop and costumer Sissy Beck provides the many unconventional accessories and props like football shoulder pads and a toilet plunger that stands in for the Silver Arrow award. And kudos to John F. Keenan for the fight choreography that is crucial to this epic adventure, even if there are no real weapons in play.

"Robin Hood" will be the only Upstate production in the community theatre competition at the upcoming South Carolina Theatre Association's annual convention held in Greenville for the first time in 38 years. This event will be at Centre Stage on November 7-8. Carolina Curtain Call sends its best wishes to defending champions the Mill Town Players and also to the students at Palmetto (Mustang Stage Company) and Woodmont High Schools which will be competing in the high school division. Break a Leg!

“Robin Hood” continues Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays at 7:30 p.m. and Sundays at 3 pm. at the historic Pelzer Auditorium, 214 Leby St. in Pelzer. Tickets are \$7-10. Call (864) 947-8000 or visit www.milltownplayers.org.