

Miracle on 34th Street ? all the wonders

By Constance Scrafield

First, there is the elf, impishly played by Liam MacDonald.

With his magic, he turns on the lights and lets the action begin. Then, the outrage of a boozy Santa about to lead Macy's Thanksgiving Santa Claus parade brings the real Kris Kringle in to deal with the drunk.

The set for this production of Miracle on 34th Street, now being performed for the first time at Theatre Orangeville, is so interesting, beautiful and clever, it deserves its own standing ovation. Macy's Department Store stands before us and the whole of the play takes place in and around its presence in ways that make complete sense, giving a fine continuity, with no confusion about where we are within the store's 18 locations.

Very briefly, for anyone who does not know, Miracle on 34th Street tells the tale of the Christmas when Santa himself comes to New York to see how Christmas is getting on in that modern commercial city. He is offered the job of Santa Claus in Macy's department store by the seriously un-enchanted Mrs. Walker, where he opts to run the toy department his way with surprising success.

His eventual challenge is to prove, not only to the city of New York, but more especially to convince Doris Walker and her daughter Susan to believe in him. Looks mighty unlikely at the start.

The play is great fun with the competition between Macy's and Gimbel's department stores intensifying as they wrangle over the veracity of there being a Santa Claus at all and that our hero, Kris Kringle, is indeed he. The debate leads to his case being brought to court ? to commit him as insane because he claims to be Santa Claus or release him because he is actually Santa ? quite a question for a judge looking for re-election.

The resolution is fabulous.

Romance in the tale arises from the connection between Doris, Susan and a young lawyer, Fred Gailey elegantly played by Jesse Griffiths. Enamoured of the severely practical Doris, he nevertheless takes up Kris Kringle's defence.

The cast in this play is really wonderful, with Walter Learning leading the way as Santa Claus, a perfect, perfect choice for the role and clearly loving every minute of it. He has a steady flow of conversation with young Susan, beautifully played by Hanubae Carlos, during which he discovers a way in which she will believe forever but ? it is rather a large order.

Mairi Babb is delightful as the stuffy Doris Walker, stiff with realism and unflinching in her education of her daughter, who seems at first willing to accept such a heavily adult philosophy. Doris takes the whole play to reconsider but does she finally go the distance? Come and see for yourself.

There are 20 roles for 10 players of which, those four actors only perform single parts. The rest lays on the able shoulders of the other six.

David Nairn, in his role as director, has brought the busyness of the play into clarity and the fine, sharp definition that is his mark. A tribute to Theatre Orangeville's consistently top quality productions, this one really show cases that excellence on every level under the leadership of Nairn, both as director, specifically in this case, and as the theatre's Artistic Director.

While the stage manager does not always get a mention, Kevin Olson has kept this production tight and remarkable.

The talented Beckie Morris, set designer, has really outdone herself this time.

Miracle on 34th Street runs all the way to Dec. 23. For tickets to this splendid show, visit the Box Office at the Town Hall, 87 Broadway or at the Tourist Information Centre on Buena Vista at Highway 10; call them at 519-941-3423 or go online at www.theatreorangeville.ca