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‘Rudolph’ stage musical re-creates the TV classic with glee



Rudolph (Cody J. Bolithon, left) and Clarice (Avery Moss) have some floppy-eared visitors in “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer,” now at the Broadway Playhouse. Tom McGrath photo

‘RUDOLPH THE RED-NOSED REINDEER: THE MUSICAL’

Recommended

When: Through Jan. 5, 2014

Where: Broadway Playhouse at Water Tower Place, 175 E. Chestnut

Tickets: \$18-\$50

Info: (800) 775-2000; www.broadwayinchicago.com

The stage version of “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” now at the Broadway Playhouse isn’t just telling the story of the antlered misfit who made himself useful on Christmas Eve.

It’s also paying homage to the 1964 Rankin-Bass special that has delighted several generations of children watching it on DVD or one of its seasonal CBS airings. This an authorized adaptation, first mounted by Milwaukee’s First Stage and transplanted with help from Chicago’s Emerald City Theatre, and at times it’s astonishingly loyal to its source material. All the familiar lines are there, even the awful ones.

Just like on TV, the musical opens with spinning newspaper pages telling of a dire storm. And someone made sure that when King Moonracer speaks from his throne, a spotted elephant stands watch, and when reindeer Clarice sings “There’s Always Tomorrow,” raccoons and bunnies listen in. There’s some rearranging here and some beefed-up dialogue there, but all told this production re-creates the original with great precision. Much of the fun is seeing the clever ways the special’s stop-motion effects are translated to stage. Puppeteers in head-to-toe white scurry around, operating animals and misfit toys and spinning Yukon Cornelius’ pickax in the air. When Rudolph makes his first flight, soaring in the rush of a crush requited and crying, “She thinks I’m cute!” it’s on their arms, and it’s a real crowd-pleaser.

Presenting the biggest technical challenge is the Abominable Snow Monster, the villain seen on TV as frightening and gigantic. Here he’s represented by a head and two big arms, and he’s not yet perfected. If you didn’t come in knowing the outcomes of the beast’s two big action sequences — when he chases Rudolph on the ice and is lured from his lair — you likely wouldn’t make sense of the flailing fur and billowing silks meant to depict them. This would be a good place to defy the sacred text and add some exposition.

Smartly, the fledgling elves and reindeer are played by two casts of kids, at the age when the feeling of not fitting in stings most. That’s most striking during “There’s Always Tomorrow,” now delivered with youthful spunk reminiscent of that other stage moppet who sings about tomorrow. The Rudolph at Saturday’s opening, fifth-grader Cody J. Bolithon, gave the angst-ridden animal an earnest energy, and as Hermey the dentist wannabe, Michael Saguto was the night’s most expert mimic, uncannily echoing the elf’s geeky tones.

Gliding footlessly about the stage is the snowman narrator played by Sean Patrick Fawcett, whose range is several notches higher than Burl Ives’ but affable nonetheless.

To see “Rudolph” now is to appreciate the show’s message about appreciating the misfits, conveyed during a less tolerant time. Rankin-Bass was letting kids know “it gets better” decades before Dan Savage. It’s an idea no less relevant now, and the kids who see it demonstrated at the Broadway Playhouse will learn not just about tolerance, but about retelling a story with affection and ingenuity.