

Article posted: 11/21/2013 6:00 AM

'Rudolph' a gleeful musical take on holiday favorite

By Matt Arado

The creative team behind "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer: The Musical" has wisely taken the "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" approach to the production.

The musical is based on the iconic Rankin-Bass animated television special from 1964, a program that children have watched and adored each holiday season for multiple generations.

The stage adaptation is faithful to that source material almost to the point of obsession. All the elements are here -- Rudolph and Hermey the Elf, the Island of Misfit Toys, the Abominable Snow Monster and, yes, the classic songs. The musical even finds a way to evoke the charming roughness of the TV show's stop-motion animation with its simple set and frequent use of puppets.

The result is a colorful and lively night at the theater, one that is sure to delight children and stoke a few fond memories for adults.

"Rudolph," for those who have been asleep for the past 50 years, tells the story of a young reindeer who becomes an outcast because of his nose, which emits a bright red light. He flees the North Pole community of Christmastown with another outcast -- Hermey the Elf, who would rather be a dentist than make toys for Santa. The two get involved in a series of endearingly goofy adventures before returning home, which has been hit by a massive snowstorm, to save the Christmas holiday.

The musical, a collaboration between Chicago's Emerald City Theatre and Milwaukee's Fist Stage children's theater, keeps a brisk pace as it hits all of these familiar story beats. The dialogue is so similar to its TV counterpart that I half-expected the parents in the audience to recite it right along with the actors, "Rocky Horror"-style. The actors, though, add fresh juice to the well-worn lines with performances that reach for the rafters. I particularly liked Michael Accardo, who plays Rudolph's off-kilter prospector friend, Yukon Cornelius, and Jason Bowen, who plays the perpetually enraged boss of Santa's elves. Both bring just the right amount of cartoonish mania to their performances. Among the many young actors in the cast, Glenbard West High School sophomore Michael Saguto shines as the nerdy but determined Hermey.

The unsung heroes of the cast may very well be the white-clad puppeteers who help create much of the physical action on stage. One of the key moments in the TV show occurs after Rudolph is kissed by a young doe. He jumps and soars into the air, yelling "she thinks I'm cuuuuuuuute!!" over and over. In the musical, the puppeteers re-create this moment by lifting Rudolph up and carrying him around as he yells with glee. It works beautifully.

The one disappointment in this area is the Abominable Snow Monster, the villain of the story. He appears as a gigantic puppet, and while he looks great, the working of his massive arms and paws is a bit awkward. He could have used a more proper roar, too.

The music is solid throughout, with the cast performing strong versions of classics like "Holly Jolly Christmas" and "We're A Couple of Misfits." The actors sing over prerecorded music tracks, though, and that takes a bit of the energy away.

Those quibbles aside, I can't imagine anyone not getting a warm charge out of this musical version of "Rudolph." (Well, unless your last name is Scrooge.) Parents, bring your kids to this one and start a new kind of holiday tradition.