

San Jose/Silicon Valley

Regional Reviews by [Eddie Reynolds](#)

The Voice of the Prairie

Dragon Productions Theatre Company

Also see Eddie's review of [A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum](#)

"The world is a strange world, isn't it, where wooden boxes can pull ghosts out of the sky." And in the 1923 world of John Olive's *The Voice of the Prairie*, these radio boxes provide a wonderful medium to relate a nostalgic story chock-full of many other tales of love, family, and adventure. On the tiny, intimate stage of Dragon Productions Theatre Company, the art of storytelling becomes close, personal, and totally engaging as three skilled actors bring to life more than a dozen, somewhat quirky characters with monologues and dialogues so rich that it is easy just to close one's eyes and revel in the listening—just like in the days of radio's prime.



Robert Sean Campbell and Tom Gough

Davey Quinn is *The Voice of the Prairie* who is discovered by an early radio pirate Leon Schwab. The fast-talking Leon is making his way across the plains states, setting up temporary, unlicensed stations in order to entice lonely farm families to buy one of his radios and to bring new worlds into their isolated homes (only soon to move on and leave them station-less). Davey's knack of spontaneously telling stories about his now-deceased Irish Poppy and especially about a blind girl Frankie whom he rescued from an abusive father quickly earn him fame across the American heartland and earn Leon lots of sold radios. Davey's on-the-air recounting of adventures with the sightless but boldly daring Frankie become ever more fantastic as they jump from moving trains for travel, steal roosters for eating, and hang dangerously from high river cliffs, just for the joy of it. As audience, we thrill both to his 1923 on-the-air tellings as well as to the intermittent flashbacks to 1895 where we witness the same stories occurring before us. As Davey says, "The stories just keep on coming. The radio microphone just pulls them out of me. I'm getting as crazy as Poppy." But those same stories of his Poppy and Frankie are for Davey also like "demons, they shriek at me." Frankie is lost to him after only a few weeks of high-jinks life on the run. His later, broadcasted stories become a desperate, on-the-air searchlight seeking his boyhood pal and one-true love.

Each of our three actors is masterful in creating this menagerie of strange folks who hover between characters from fantasy and people we somehow once personally knew. Robert Sean Campbell's Davey Quinn has a boyish, likeable persona that is marked with bouts of high-octave laughter and frenetic energy and other moments of contemplation and lost eyes that yearn for someone missing in his life. Once his storytelling begins, it is as if he is in another world where only he can see what he relates in words to his audience. But time and again, he quickly sheds some garments and years of life to become before us his younger self; and he does so without missing a beat of the tale itself.

Instant transformations are the constant demand of Tom Gough who enters in the play's opening as the aged

Poppy with heavy Irish brogue, love of whisky, and ever-present pipe. Later, he is the smooth-talking New York traveling salesman and radio announcer Leon Schwab (with an accent that calls to mind the Lower East Side sidewalk hawker). Often, Mr. Gough walks out one door only to enter another in just a matter of minutes, with the accent, trappings, and demeanor of a totally new member of one of Davey's tellings (like a tobacco-spitting, shirtless Southern farmer in overalls or a jolly jailer with twinkling eyes from the Midwest). Watching and listening to this talented actor is a highlight of the evening's entertainment.

Not to be outdone, Maria Giere Marquis is a marvel as the blind Frankie, later grown-up teacher Francis. Never do we suspect that she is anything but sightless, but always are we enthralled by Frankie's abilities to see things the rest of us miss. "I can feel your freckles," she tells Davey as she explores his face. "You are eight steps from me," she declares another time. Ms. Marquis ensures that we believe these are not lines in a script but are the real-time insights of the remarkable girl and lady she portrays. With a body that bravely bolts across rooms or crumples into a mushy ball or leaps from floor to the sky as if propelled, her Frankie is fascinating and always fresh with nuance and expression.

The real delights of these three are when they are in twos. From the opening scene of young Davey gleefully trying to pull off being the deaf son of his father telling a tale in the local pub to the final scene of the adult Davey and Frankie ready to plunge off a cliff, knowing they can now fly in their reunited state, the cast does its best in tandems. When Davey and Frankie gulp down an unseen watermelon, the ghost seeds they spit at each other are so vivid that we as audience move our own heads to dodge them. A first kiss so funny even the two of them giggle is a delight to watch as is the wonderfully orchestrated banter and ribbing between Davey and Leon whenever money or business association is discussed. The deep feelings between any two of the primary characters when they are together are evident in lit-up faces, genuine tears, visible sighs, and eyes that meet in locked moments of connection.

All of the magic of this much-loved, widely produced play does not come just from the writer or even from these actors. Meredith Hagedorn's direction puts together all the pieces of this time-traveling, many-character, small-stage puzzle into a live movie that flows flawlessly. Decisions to use recorded voices intermingled with those spoken on stage evoke both the sound wave and waves of memory intermingled before us. Plunging us at one point into Frankie's dark world with all the voices crashing in around her and us powerfully leaves us with the impression of what it would be like to live in that constant radio-like atmosphere. Kudos goes to Ms. Hagedorn.

Brooke Jennings' costumes are both authentic to the times and easy to change, even as we often watch. While simple in construction, the two-level, mostly wooden set of Jesse Ploog calls to mind a less-harried time when sitting around huddled next to the radio was a highlight of one's day.

The Voice of the Prairie reminds us that listening to the world and people around us opens up whole new visions and possibilities in our lives. The magic of the radio in 1923 is today the same magic that we feel whenever we allow another's stories to sweep us away from our own obsessions. Now is a good time to journey back in time and to Redwood City to see and hear this Dragon Productions gem.

The Voice of the Prairie continues at Dragon Productions Theatre Company, 2120 Broadway Street, Redwood City, through September 13, 2015. Tickets are available online at <http://www.dragonproductions.net> or by calling 650-493-2006.

Photo: James Kasyan

Cheers - and be sure to Check the [lineup of great shows this season in the San Jose/Silicon Valley area](#)