

Fine cast brings life to 'Voice of the Prairie'

There's a sucker born every minute -- yes, P.T. Barnum is often credited with that phrase, but an obsequious yet amiable radio hustler named Leon Schwab lives by that mantra as well in John Olive's "The Voice of the Prairie."

But this "Prairie," onstage at Dragon Theatre in Redwood City, also includes a healthy chunk of radio's early days, as well as a sweet and sentimental love story interwoven with Schwab's cons. The result is an intriguing though not always easy to follow play that is worth seeing.

That's because three stellar actors play a curious, fascinating list of characters, from the radio hustler Schwab (a frequently hilarious and sometimes sympathetic Tom Gough) to beguiling Robert Sean Campbell as the story spin-master nonpareil Davey Quinn, and ferociously enthusiastic Maria Giere Marquis as the mischievous blind girl, Frankie (she is hapless, star-struck Suzy as well).

What's particularly enjoyable in Dragon's intimate setting is the opportunity to sit close enough to the actors that the audience gets to witness every change in demeanor as well as a plethora of widely divergent facial expressions.

The play, which was first seen by director Meredith Hagedorn at a Kentucky theater more than 25 years ago, pulls together a curious batch of people: Davey's yarn-spinning "Pappy"; an asthmatic pastor hopelessly in love with Frankie (flawlessly -- and uproariously -- performed by Gough); an abusive father; a sheriff; a redneck farmer; and a smattering of others.

After the somewhat slow start circa 1895, everything meshes when the plot shifts to summer in the Midwest in the early 1920s. Leon has a trunk full of radios to sell in small prairie towns, so he creates a radio station and starts broadcasting without a license. (He also becomes Miss Emily, who provides advice to letters sent in by his listeners.)

When Leon overhears Davey spinning a story about Pappy and about his adventures with Frankie, he realizes he's struck gold and brings him to the radio station to tell his

stories over the air. At first Davey's too shy, but soon he realizes that it's something he loves -- and is good at. It turns out that Frankie, now Frances, is listening, though she's now a school teacher leading a cloistered life.

Solid as Campbell is, it's literally impossible not to watch Marquis' portrayal of the blind Frankie. She plays her as physically brave, willing to jump off freight trains and into rivers hand-in-hand with Davey. Though she can't see, she nevertheless seems fearless and brave -- solid acting indeed.

Hagedorn's fast-paced direction keeps things moving, sometimes in 1895, sometimes in 1923, yet she slows things down intermittently to allow Davey and Frankie quiet, sweet moments so theatergoers will recognize the depth of their love and commitment.

The simple, wood-infused set created by scenic designer Jesse Ploog works well, and Jeff Swan's lighting was particularly inventive to heighten some scenes. Although most of Martyn Jones' sound effects are effective, the "crackling fire" actually sounds like someone's munching on Rice Krispies, because there were a lot of tiny little snaps, crackles and pops. Brooke Jennings shows her resourcefulness in giving Gough costumes he can change in-and-out of quickly, ditto for Marquis, who switches from old to young Frankie right on stage.

This play is a sweet, small story far afield of big musical productions and overwrought science fiction or zombie plots. It's satisfying summer evening fare.

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Theater

What: "The Voice of the Prairie"

Where: Dragon Theatre, 2120 Broadway St., Redwood City

When: 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays

Through: Sept. 13

Tickets: \$27-35; 650-493-2006 or www.dragonproductions.net