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Stories from the Great Plains

"The Voice of the Prairie" spins spellbinding yarns

by Karla Kane / Palo Alto Weekly

Davey Quinn had a rough childhood: an orphaned, impoverished, vagabond existence with "Poppy," his whiskey-swilling con man of an Irish great uncle, followed by time on the lam with Frankie, a blind girl running from her alcoholic, abusive father. Despite enduring starvation and beatings, the optimism of youth and the cheerful companionship of his fellow travelers allowed him to see life as a series of great adventures.

It's Davey's compelling tales about those good ol' days -- along with the gift of storytelling inherited from Poppy -- that drive the plot of "The Voice of the Prairie." Redwood City's Dragon Theatre is currently presenting a lovely version of this sweet play by John Olive, set in the early days of radio.

Davey is discovered in a Nebraska feed store in 1923 by Leon Schwab, a fast-talking New Yorker with a scheme to strike it rich by bringing radio to the folk of the Great Plains. Now a shy, somewhat haunted but still adventurous man, Davey agrees to team up with Schwab to reminisce on air about charming-but-kooky Poppy and the irrepressibly sunny and openhearted Frankie. Soon, Davey's storytelling is a hit, his show a sort of proto-"Prairie Home Companion." He's in demand at stations from Kansas City to the Big Apple, and Schwab, run afoul of the newly formed FCC, sees Davey as his ticket to the big time. He manages to track down the long-lost Frankie, now a prim and respectable schoolteacher in Arkansas, and facilitates a reunion between the former partners in crime and childhood sweethearts. Can they recapture the fun-loving spirit and deep bond of their past, or has it been too long?

The play's timeline flip-flops between the 1920s and 1895, when most of Davey's stories take place. Snippets of recorded dialogue are spliced in with the actors' live performances, briefly blurring the lines between present life, flashbacks and radio broadcasts.

This switching between eras requires actors Robert Sean Campbell and Maria Giere Marquis, as Davey and Frankie, to transform themselves from children to adults and back again, using only slight costume and prop adjustments and their considerable acting skills. Guided ably by Dragon's artistic director Meredith Hagedorn, they handle these transformations with ease. When the costume changes happen on stage (in one case, Marquis pulls on a sensible gray skirt over her fanciful farm dress, signifying the change to adult Frankie), it's even more charming than if the change had taken place off stage.



Actors Robert Sean Campbell, left, Maria Giere Marquis and Tom Gough portray a range of eras and characters in "The Voice of the Prairie." Photo by James Kasyan.



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Marquis takes a while to settle in to her character. As Frankie the ebullient child, she comes across as a bit too manic at first, perhaps in an attempt to prove how free-spirited and confident she is, blindness be damned. Part of the trouble is that Frankie's and Davey's ages are never quite established in these scenes; they waver between behaving like very young children and like adolescents on the cusp of sexual awakening. It's only when when Marquis transforms into adult Frankie and back again that we see a complicated woman, grown resigned and wearied by her difficult life, yet still containing the spark and zany humor of her younger self.

Campbell, seen earlier this summer in Pear Theatre's "Arcadia," makes Davey an endearingly innocent and awkward wanderer in both his child and adult incarnations. Young Davey is quick to laugh with a wild, high-pitched giggle. As adult Davey, Campbell retains this characteristic but gives it a slightly more restrained and masculine tone.

Campbell and Marquis are good, but the true MVP of the show is the amazing Tom Gough, who plays not only the lovably conniving Schwab but also nearly every other role in the play, including old Irish Poppy; Frankie's cruel farmer father; a sadistic hillbilly; a no-nonsense jailer; and James, the asthmatic Methodist preacher who's desperately in love with Frankie and very concerned when her past exploits come to light. Gough inhabits these roles so fully, including in vocal range, accent and body language, that just the change from one jacket to another is enough to show he's become another character entirely.

The production is well-suited to the Dragon's strengths. In the small space without much set dressing, a simple shift of chairs, radios and microphones serves as a change of scenery. Lighting cues by Jeff Swan -- including dimming the lights when the play takes blind Frankie's perspective -- are sensitive and effective. Much like Poppy's well-worn tales, "The Voice of the Prairie," is a warm-hearted and compelling yarn, and Dragon's version makes for a delightful few hours of theater, cozy as a favorite story recounted around a crackling campfire.

What: "The Voice of the Prairie"

Where: Dragon Theatre, 2120 Broadway, Redwood City

When: Through Sept. 13. Thursday-Saturday, 8 p.m.; Sunday, 2 p.m. Sold out Sunday, Aug. 30. Post-show discussion Sunday, Sept. 6.

Cost: \$27-\$35

Info: Go to dragonproductions.net or call 650-493-2006.

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