

CHARLIE BROWN REVIEW

Charles Shultz's entourage of cartoon caricatures portrayed for fifty years in the "Peanuts" cartoon strip are all too human timeless treasures. They will always remain a multilayered polished lens capturing the mirth, merriment, pathos and silliness of life while bringing wit filled joy and wisdoms into as many depths of focus as there are ages to enjoy. Although a veritable feast for "Peanuts" fans waits at the wonderful Charles Shultz museum in Santa Clara, one heck of an appetizer, well, Good grief!, a sumptuous buffet is wonderfully prepared and served up by Solano Community College in their rendition of the delightful 1999 Tony Award winning revival of the 1967 musical, "You're A Good Man Charlie Brown".

Cartoonists and poets are the "unacknowledged legislators of the world" plying parables on paper about universal truths of being human. Shultz's ruse of using six year olds to graphically portray hope, hubris, innocence, devotion, despair, excitement, intensity, silliness and at times isolation is an instant connection allowing us to laugh at what we identify with-ourselves. Shultz once wrote, ". . . if you do not say anything in a cartoon, you might as well not draw it at all". The book, lyrics and music of "You're a Good Man Charlie Brown" by Clark Gesner perfectly echo Shultz's thoughts.

The story line is a montage of charming skits and songs derived from moments in days of ordinary life for the hapless Charlie Brown. In the opening tune, Charlie Brown is regaled with a rousing tribute of qualified praise. Yet soon, alone, he is lost in unrequited love pining for the unseen "little redheaded girl,"

True to form, the self styled devilish diva Lucy is hell bent on piercing the artistic soul of the intense Schroeder who will have nothing of it. Her baby brother Linus, the grand innocent and ever the romantic thoughtful muse, is absolutely fanatical when it comes to his blankie. Sally is sweet but scrappy; and Snoopy, well this perky pooch is hard wired for good cheer and indomitable optimism.

Events unfold as Linus enjoys private time with "My Blanket and Me", Lucy revels in self coronation, and Charlie Brown does combat with "The Kite" and after predictably receiving no Valentines, seeks solace from Lucy's five-cent comic clinic in "The Doctor Is In.". Act I concludes with insights into individual struggles with the homework assignment of writing a hundred word essay in "The Book Report."

Act II pitches the inimitable WWI ace, Snoopy, in heated combat with the Red Baron and we commiserate with Charlie relating the disastrous results of the "Baseball Game". After witnessing the infectious, over the top joy of Snoopy when it's "Supertime", we all gather round to ponder it all in "Happiness".

Harbor Theatre works well for this production and the direction by Matthew Teague Miller is spot on, especially in casting. The minimalist set and simple choreography is perfectly suited to keep the focus on

the characters. Costuming is cartoon strip picture perfect. Masterful live musical accompaniment using a tight small ensemble directed by maestro Joseph Anderson is a perfect complement.

Individual characterizations, as well as an ensemble, are largely quite strong. It is a genuine pleasure to see an ably directed cast who truly understand Lucy's pithy observation... "You have the singular distinction, yes it's true, whatever it's worth, you're you". Rubber faced prince of pathos, Bret McLaughlin, owns the role of Charlie Brown. Believably self absorbed Amanda Durante is the crabby, butinski, know it all Lucy who excels at taking the wind out of your sails. But she too, is largely filled with only wind. Ray Scott captures both Linus' blanket and penchant for philosophic musings,

Ashley Boehm capably handles the role of Sally, the little sister of Charlie Brown and Seth Michael Anderson embraces the artistic temperament and zeal of the somewhat disaffected Schroeder. David Collins as Snoopy is a consummate professional who as a pip of a pup garners laughs at every turn and has some pretty fine vocal chops, howls and all. I used to quip that I wanted to grow up to be the man my dog thinks I am. Well, perhaps, but it is a pretty fair deal to grow up to be the man, or whatever character du jour, Snoopy sees himself as.

Theatre works when the curtains and veils that separate audiences from seeing themselves portrayed on stage seamlessly disappear. In this regard, the curtain is definitely up and out of the way in Solano Community Colleges' production. As the ensemble wisely reminds us in the closing "Happiness" number... "Happiness is being alone every now and then and happiness is coming home again". Come home again and come see "You're a Good Man Charlie Brown" at Suisun Harbor Theater.

Kevin Ryan is a retired Colonel, physician, musician and author who lives in Fairfield.