

# THE MAUI NEWS

## STAGE REVIEW: 'Annie' brings sunshine for the holidays

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What do you get when two theater organizations come together and pool funds, personnel and facilities to make the most of lean economic times?

"This is our Christmas gift to you!" Alexis Dascoulias told a full house at the Historic Iao Theater on opening night of "Annie." The co-production between Maui OnStage and Maui Academy of Performing Arts is indeed a joyous package that pays off for Maui theater and theatergoers alike.

Set during the Great Depression, the Broadway musical with book by Thomas Meehan, music by Charles Strouse and lyrics by Martin Charnin has themes of unemployment and the need for sweeping change that echo our current economic situation - and give it a hopeful spin.

Annie (played by Seabury Hall freshman Tyler Charbonneau) is a New York City orphan who clings to the dream of finding her parents. Despite their unhappy living conditions, she and fellow orphans (Summer Macedo, Marley Mehring, Star Nobriga, Ashlyn Aniban, Olivia Olivit, Danielle Morton, Hannah Patrick and Madeline Hamada) are a spirited group.

Brandishing buckets and washrags, they pound their way through "It's a Hard Knock Life," the first of many engaging pieces choreographed by visiting New York City director Brian Swasey.

Good thing the orphans are a sturdy bunch, since they have to face up to the awful Miss Hannigan (Deidre Tegarden). Clutching a flask in one hand and an off-key whistle in the other, Tegarden gives the orphanage matron a melancholy air that makes us chuckle one minute and feel sorry for her the next. Costume designer Kathleen Schulz's selection of droopy lace dresses paired with black shoes and rolled-down nylons adds to the character's angst.

As Miss Hannigan's nemesis, Annie, the spunky Charbonneau does a great job. She sings favorites like "Maybe" and "Tomorrow" with a clear, strong voice and dances an adorable waltz with "Daddy" Warbucks, who is played superbly by Robert E. Wills.

With his booming baritone voice on "Why Should I Change a Thing?" "Something Was Missing," and the fun, showy "N.Y.C." and his big, blustery presence, Wills brings real professionalism to the show - especially in his dual role as musical director.

The orchestra (Beth Fobbe-Wills and Vania Jerome on keyboards, Angie Carr on sinfonium, and Perry Gragas on percussion) is excellent, but the rousing music overshadowed some of the softer singing on opening night, even with the new OrchEXTRA computerized system.

Caro Walker's minimalistic set resembles the panels of a comic strip, enhanced by oversized cartoon panels and a Sunday Times banner. During the overture, the actors create tableaux vivants, bringing to life Harold Gray's "Little Orphan Annie" comic strip upon which the musical is based.

Much more than the movie, the play brings in the gritty political reality of the era with the depiction of a rough shantytown where homeless families huddle around a stewpot. When little Annie comes upon the scene with her newly found dog Sandy (a very patient and well-behaved Walter J. Dog), she's like a ray of sunshine.

"That's something I haven't heard since 1928: optimism!" says one "Hooverville-ite."

Annie has a similar effect on President Roosevelt (Mark Collmer, who also designed the lighting), who urges everyone in the Cabinet Room at the White House to sing, "Tomorrow, tomorrow, I love ya, tomorrow!"

Too bad Miss Hannigan's no-good brother Rooster and his conniving girl Lilly are immune to Annie's charms. Chris Kepler and Casey Murphy put on a hilarious show as the wheelin-and-dealin' pair. Their "Easy Street" number together with Tegarden is camped up with big kicks and jazz hands.

Another choreographic highlight is "I Think I'm Gonna Like It Here" - when Annie arrives at the Warbucks mansion under the wing of his lovely assistant Grace (Lisa Paulson), and the well-heeled staff dances around the potted palms, waving yellow dusters.

Humorous scenes are plentiful, like the NBC Radio show of the effusive Bert Healy (Eric Molina), and the orphans' delightful spoof of the show.

The play's final scenes have a warm, Christmasy feel, complete with lighted tree and festive decor as the servants dress the house for Annie's "adoption party." Skip the Hollywood kidnapping and helicopter rescue; the Broadway ending is much quieter, but every bit as satisfying.

The product of teamwork and collaboration in tough times, "Annie" is one Christmas gift that's sure to make you stick out your chin and grin.