WILLY WONKA Faithful Adaptation

by Walter Bender

Wilmington Drama League’s latest offering is the family musical, WILLY WONKA, a stage adaptation of the book by Roald Dahl, about the eccentric chocolate maker and his search for a successor. The book was successfully adapted into a movie starring Gene Wilder, and more recently another movie with Johnnie Depp. It was obvious from the excitement and interest of the audience in attendance at WDL’s production, the movies have captured the imagination of the youth.

Grant Bailey portrays one of the Oompa-Loompa’s in Wilmington Drama League’s production of ROALD DAHL’S WILLY WONKA.

Director Annie Richi has assembled a huge cast to portray the story of Wonka, Charlie, and the various people they encounter. In addition to the children that Charlie knows in his town, there are the other children who win the invitations to tour the factory, their parents, Charlie’s family, the Oompa Loompas, townspeople, and the list goes on. I mention this in order to applaud the costumers, makeup artists and choreographers, who made the show a visual feast. The set designer joined into the preparation, with each set piece at the factory especially appearing good enough to eat. I was impressed with the expertise of the technical people in recreating the fantasy of the chocolate factory.

Cole Swany stars as Charlie Bucket in WILLY WONKA, playing at Wilmington Drama League through June 27.

The cast had a number of enthusiastic performers, who did their all to entertain the audience. They faithfully captured the essence of the characters without deviating from the popular characterizations that the audience would recognize.

The director’s concept in putting this production together was very good, but some of the execution came up short. The use of a flat-panel TV for various slides and one very cute scene in the factory was a good idea, but the TV was far too small for the space, and most of the audience couldn’t see what was on the screen. A projection of the vertigo on a screen behind the boat was well-conceived, but unless you were sitting directly in front of the boat the effect was lost. There were a number of other things that similarly didn’t work, but I appreciated the thought involved in trying to create the effects.

I have to say that as a piece of art, WILLY WONKA does not measure up. But, from the reaction of the audience, art isn’t always necessary. A young theatre-goer behind me whispered excitedly to her mother at each scene change what was upcoming, and how much she loved what she was seeing. And, at the end of the performance, the predominantly young audience stood and cheered the cast. In this case, this kind of show, isn’t that what is really important?

So, cheers to Wilmington Drama League for bringing a bit of a fantasy to life on stage for families to enjoy. If your children are fans of WONKA, they will not be disappointed.

ROALD DAHL’S WILLY WONKA
by Leslie Bricusse and Anthony Newley
Directed by Annie Sleese Richi
Music Direction by Kelly Davis Kline
Choreography by Ryan Blackson
June 18 - 27, 2010

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