

A&E: Actors Theatre of Indiana goes green

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Lou Harry - lharry@ibj.com

IBJ staff



This week, theatrical extremes—the gentle “A Year with Frog and Toad” and its opposite, the brutal “Assassins.”

Frog is confident. Toad is selfdoubting. Frog gets mail. Toad doesn't. Frog is willing to take some risks. Toad is cautious. Frog looks funny in a bathing suit. Toad looks funnier in a bathing suit. And then there's an actionpacked fight sequence in which ... No, that doesn't happen. Frog and Toad are friends. They love each other. They are happy when the other is happy. But then the villain comes to town, a giant ...

Nope, no villain. Over the course of 12 months, very little happens to Frog and Toad. Their lives don't change. Nothing really threatens their existence or their livelihood. They eat cookies (perhaps a few too many).

They fly a kite. Toad gets mad at Frog, briefly, over a sledding incident, but the conflict is quickly resolved through kind words.

And then there's the big finish, where ...

Nope. Show's over.

But, damn, if these two anthropomorphic amphibians didn't win me over in Actors Theatre of Indiana's production of the musical “A Year with Frog and Toad” at the Pike Performing Arts Center. (Note: While “A Year with Frog and Toad” closed Dec. 23, a 35-minute version will be performed at the Children's Museum of Indianapolis from March 11-April 20th.)

Perhaps the gentlest of productions ever seen on Broadway (yes, somehow this slice of peacefulness found its way there after a sold-out off-Broadway run), “A Year with Frog and Toad” steadfastly refuses to be cynical, it refuses to indulge in pop-culture references, and it refuses to pander.

In essence, it says “Remember when friendship mattered? When there was a burning in your soul because you upset your buddy?” And it says it repeatedly and beautifully. I'm honestly getting choked up here thinking about the moment when Frog (the bright Bradley Reynolds) has to explain to Toad (an eminently huggable Don Farrell, production manager for ATI) why he occasionally needs to go off into the woods by himself. “This morning I woke up and thought, ‘I am happy,’” sings Frog. “It's been since April since I have been sad. I'll go be alone to think how I'm happy. For all that I have, and all that I've had.”

Let me be clear. This isn't Barney. This isn't The Doodlebops.

This is theater that talks directly to kids while moving open-to-the-experience adults.

I'm all for ironic kids theater. I'm all for action adventure. But I'm thrilled that a show such as this exists—and that it's been given such a loving staging by the ATI folks. “A Year with Frog and Toad” is what Sesame Street should be doing on stage instead of those big, vacuous arena shows.

Is this a perfect production? Nope. The Kite scene feels like it was stolen from the You're a Good Man Charlie Brown playbook and the scary story scene is fuzzy. Plus the ...



Photo courtesy Actors Theatre of Indiana

Don Farrell is Toad, who, according to the song, looks funny in a bathing suit in the musical “A Year with Frog and Toad,” staged by Actors Theatre of Indiana. Over his shoulder is Bradley Reynolds as Frog.



Lowbrow Productions presents
"Assassins," through Dec. 30 at Hedback
Theatre. For information, call 523-7462
or visit www.lowbrowproductions.org.

You know what? In the spirit of Frog and Toad and the holidays, why carp? Actors Theatre of Indiana gave us a very lovely gift this year.

Frog would say "thank you."

So would Toad.

So do I.

OK, there's no smooth way to transition from the aforementioned lily-pad dwellers to presidential assassins. Therefore, I won't try.

I'll just say that fledgling multi-media company Lowbrow Productions has taken over Hedback Theatre with its production of the Stephen Sondheim musical "Assassins." (through Dec. 30) and the result is not just a gutsy piece of holiday counterprogramming, but an effective and very well-sung presentation of a challenging show.

"Assassins" is one of the more audacious, engaging and, yes, educational, musicals to have hit Broadway in the last 20 years. Although never widely popular, it has a strong following among musical theater fans not averse to a musical—an often funny one—in which most of the characters are people who have (or, at least, have tried to) kill a U.S. president. In a way, it's the perverse flip-side of Disney's Hall of Presidents, allowing the misfits who have taken such extreme actions the chance to be heard.

Don't get me wrong. The show is never pro-assassination. In fact, fighting such concerns, the song "Something Just Broke" was added to the show after its initial off-Broadway production to make clear that Sondheim and playwright John Weidman are being anthropological here, not subversive.

Lowbrow's production highlights both the show's strengths and its weaknesses. On the negative side, "Assassins" here and elsewhere never finds a consistent structure. The carnival barker who introduces the show, enticing passers by to "come on and shoot a president," disappears after a scene, giving way to a balladeer whose thematic purpose remains unclear. And while most of the conversations between the gunmen (and women) are clearly fictional—we know John Wilkes Booth never chatted up Lee Harvey Oswald—others are fuzzy. It would be easy for someone to leave the theater believing that Ford-shooters Sarah Jane Moore and Lynette "Squeaky" Fromme knew each other.

These, ultimately, are minor issues given the strength of the music—one of Sondheim's most consistently strong and varied scores. "The Ballad of Booth" is a haunting rationale for Lincoln's assassination, effectively delivered here by Eric Karwisch, who understands that Booth was, indeed, an actor. "Unworthy of Your Love" is a twisted take on pop ballads, with Fromme and John Hinckley singing not to each other but to Charles Manson and Jody Foster (Bobbi Bates and Dean Reynolds seem a bit old for the Fromme and Hinckley roles, but that's something you have to get used to in regional theaters without extensive resources).

Most effectively, "The Ballad of Guiteau" puts the audience into the mind of the would-be ambassador to France (a creepily enthusiastic Scot Greenwell) who plugged President Garfield. The sequences' climax—the striking image of Guiteau "going to the Lordy" he had just sung about—is just one of many powerful directorial choices Brian Noffke smoothly incorporates into the show.

And in the largely non-singing role of Samuel Byck (the guy who plotted to crash a plane into the Nixon White House), Triston Ross comes across as the bastard child of Sam Kineson and Lewis Black, offering a nuanced performance that clearly establishes that this musical also has a strong script.

Perhaps the best sign for me is that both "Assassins" and "A Year with Frog and Toad" are shows I would, if time permitted, return to again this week. Time has run out on the "Frog and Toad" (which I hope returns next year). You still have a shot at "Assassins." Take it. •

This column appears weekly. Send information on upcoming arts and entertainment events to lharry@ibj.com.