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## "Charlie Brown' is a holiday treat

By TOM CHESEK  
CORRESPONDENT

"How's it like being an actor?"

"How do you look so small on stage?"

"Why do you do it at night?"

The astute young theatergoers and their parents who braved an opening night blizzard had plenty of good questions for the cast, as the Two River Theater Company production of "You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown" got off to a snow-muffled but spirited start on Saturday night in Red Bank.

Adapted from the immortal "Peanuts" characters of Charles M. Schulz and featuring a score of original songs by Clark Gesner, "Charlie Brown" comes to the Two River mainstage as the professional stage troupe's annual holiday-season family show — and if the robust reaction from preview audiences (including a packed house for their first Scout Day matinee) is any indicator, then Charlie and friends (under the direction of "manager" Matt Pfeiffer) have fielded a winning team of All-Stars this time.

Wearing the oversize shoes and that famous orange shirt in the title role is Doug Hara, the scary-good and versatile actor who embodied the devilish Puck in TRTC's recent "Midsummer Night's Dream." Of course, there's not a trace of Shakespeare's messenger of mischief in Hara's appropriately sweet sad-sack here, with the actor sounding an early keynote in a hilariously awkward lunchtime interlude with the never-seen "little red-haired girl."

Hara's joined here by two of his mates from that "Dream" cast - Two River regular Erin Weaver ("Mary's Wedding") as a suitably spunky little sister Sally (a part that was added to the musical for its 1999 Broadway revival) and comic character man Richard Ruiz ("Frog and Toad") as the irrepressible dreamer Snoopy. As in Schulz's best strips, the characters and their players all have their moments at center stage — Sally in her epic declaration of "My New Philosophy" and Snoopy in his showstopper celebration of "Supertime."

New to the Two River stage — but hitting the ground running in their respective parts — are Lauren Silverman (an effervescently crabby Lucy) and Matt Munro (whose soulful Linus nearly steals the first act with "My Blanket and Me") - and you've surely never seen a Schroeder as tall as Jordan Barbour, the lofty intellectual and precious prodigy who's still one of the gang at heart.

David Gordon's set design keeps things appropriately simple, with its floor and backdrops decorated with the dot-screen pattern of a Sunday color comics page. Devon Painter's inventive costumes establish a fine balance between the actors' own personalities and the iconic cartoon figures they're channeling. And musical director Greg Brown's three-piece combo evokes echoes (and at least one direct quote) of Vince Guaraldi's wonderful scores to the great Mendelson-Melendez TV specials.

Above all else, Gesner's 1967 musical — a modern ensemble piece in the vein of "The Fantasticks" and even "Hair" — has a respect for its source material that's as beautiful in its simplicity as Schulz's most timelessly universal work. And, like the best adaptations of "Peanuts" to other media, this enduring show "gets it" in the most pleasing kind of way.

"You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown" continues with performances Wednesdays through Sundays until January 10 (extended from January 3 as originally announced). Ticket prices, reservations and full schedule details can be obtained by calling 732-345-1400 or visiting [www.trtc.org](http://www.trtc.org).