

Two River Times

Scene On Stage

Good Grief! It's The "Peanuts" Gang!

"You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown" at Two River Theatre

By Philip Dorian



You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown isn't just a kids' show any more than *Peanuts* is just a kiddie comic strip. Sure, the characters appeal to their age six (and even younger) contemporaries, but Charles M. Schulz's genius lies in their attraction to anyone who ever *was* six.

In the age of shoddy stage adaptations from other mediums, *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown* is a marvel. Faithful to its source, it began as a collection of songs written by Princeton-educated Clark M. Gesner. Initially, the holders of the strip's syndication rights refused permission to use the characters, but Gesner sent a demo tape directly to Schulz, who personally approved an album.

The theatrical version followed in 1967, running nearly four years off-Broadway, and the rest is history. Besides myriad community and student productions, the musical was revived on Broadway in 1999 with a few now-standard improvements.

You're a Good Man is a series of events picked from all the days of *Charlie Brown*, including Valentine's Day, baseball season and his less-than-successful kite-flying afternoon. The sketches combine dialogue and music, nearly all written by Gesner, who wrote little else of note, nor did he need to. The play is an absolute delight, and Two River's production is near-perfection.

It takes only a few minutes to firmly fix Doug Hara as Charlie Brown. With his bald pate, slightly stooped stance and wide-eyed stare, Hara communicates a sense of bewilderment at everything going on around him. "Failure face," it's called; but be advised: it's Charlie's, not Doug's.

It's unlikely that Lauren Singerman is as crabby as Lucy van Pelt - who could be? - but she sure acts it well. Lucy's always right, even when she's wrong, sharing "Little Known Facts" with Linus. And Singerman more than hints at Lucy's embryonic feminine wiles as she vamps Schroeder across his piano.

Linus can't give up his blanket, and why should he? Matt Mundy makes the case with "My Blanket and Me," Linus's security-symbol anthem. Mundy and the others create an endearing corps de blanket ballet.

Theater lore has it that the role of Charlie Brown's little sister Sally was inserted into the 1999 revival (replacing another character) specifically for Kristen Chenoweth. If it hadn't, it might just as well have been for Erin Weaver. Her Sally is a charmer with a mind of her own, a feisty little girl who stands up to authority. Sally's song, "My New Philosophy," is a gem; Weaver makes it sparkle.

Another enhancement in the '99 revival was the casting of an African-American as Schroeder, widening the show's appeal. Following through, Two River's Schroeder is Jordan Barbour, whose race is incidental to his expertly-acted frustration with Lucy's attentions or his intense lobbying for a national "Beethoven Day."

Snoopy is decked out in a doggy suit, but comically gifted Richard Ruiz humanizes the beloved beagle, whose fantasy as a World War I flying ace, is fully explored. And the exuberant Ruiz makes the "Suppertime" song-and-dance one for the ages. Truly, isn't sitting down to a sumptuous meal one of life's joys?

Rarely does a creative team mesh as well as director Matt Pfeiffer, choreographer Suli Holum and musical director Greg Brown have here. Clearly, all three have kept in touch with their inner child.

On opening night, a perceptive child asked how the adult actors managed to look so small on stage. A cast member explained that Devon Painter's costumes (spot-on, including wigs) and David P. Gordon's set designs (cheerful, colorful, fun) were outsized to create the effect. I would add that all six actors inhabit Schulz's beloved characters without a trace of self-consciousness.

Reviewing the original show in *The New York Times*, critic Walter Kerr wrote that Schulz and Gesner had accomplished a small miracle by "opening up one end of the comic strip frame and letting the people out." You have until January 10 to open up your heart and let *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown* in. That'll be five cents please.

"Charlie Brown" continues through Jan. 10 at Two River Theater, Bridge Avenue, Red Bank with performances Monday-Wednesday, Dec. 28-30 at 1 p.m.; Saturdays at 1 and 7 p.m.; Sundays at 12 and 4 p.m. and Friday, Jan. 8 at 7 p.m. Information and tickets (\$30): 732-345-1400 and online at www.trtc.org.