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Sandy steals the show in 'Annie' opening

[Print Page](#)

By Peggie Miller Performing arts columnist

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Whoever advised actors to beware of being on stage with children and dogs probably gave good advice. It's hard to compete with all that cuteness; they'll upstage you every time.

But that didn't phase the adult stars of "Annie," currently playing from STAGE RIGHT OF TEXAS at downtown Conroe's Crighton Theatre. The adults came across admirably, even up against a multitude of young ones portraying homeless urchins left to the mercy of nasty Miss Hannigan (comic YVONNE NELSON of Sophie Tucker fame).

There's also competition from a heretofore homeless mutt, now adopted by the Hope Harris family.

HAROLD E. WOOD JR., did a feel good Daddy Warbucks, taking little Annie into his world-weary heart where she provided abundant warmth needed to thaw.

SR newcomer JULIA STINSON sang with a finely trained operatic voice that disappointed only because there wasn't more to hear, say in a solo or two. But t'wasn't written that way. Ms. Stinson played Warbucks' secretary Grace Farrell, part of the happy ending that everybody craved.

The show is full of comedy, from Miss Hannigan's blatant tippling to the slapstick villains Rooster Hannigan and Lily (TOMMY HUNTER and MAREDITH ZARITSKI, respectively) looking to scam themselves into riches as orphan Annie's long lost parents. The butler, PATRICK SLAGLE, takes a few turns in the comedic circle, as well.

But the funniest bit on opening night wasn't a part of the script.

It found Annie singing her big song, "Tomorrow," on stage with the once homeless mutt who plays Annie's dog, Sandy. Oblivious to the 300 onlookers in the audience, Sandy sat in stress-free comfort snuggled next to little Annie.

As Annie, (HOPE HARRIS) went for a high note, Sandy suddenly went for an itch on his hind quarter. He then tracked it, relentlessly and without haste, all the way to the end of "Tomorrow."

The audience tittered, giggled and clapped out loud, both in amusement and incredulous admiration for the poised little girl who reacted like the pro she is. The young Miss Harris finished her song without missing a note, and — Sandy — well, Sandy just gave up on the itch and opted for a "spit bath" right there in front of the spotlight's focus and 600 inquisitive eyes. You just never know about children and dogs.

"Annie" is full of visual treats — several set changes that traverse from the bleak orphanage to a billionaire's house at Christmas. Director TINA CAFEO made prudent use of the flyway that extends well above the Crighton stage, enabling the lowering of flats painted to enhance the on stage scenery.

Acquiring costumes for dozens of ragged orphans who later go to Warbucks' mansion dressed in silk is no mean feat. Costumer KATHLEEN ZARITSKI, with her aides, must have achy fingers from all that sewing.

Director Cafeo produces a satisfying show where those of every age will find delight (and maybe an unexpected snigger or two.)

The production was a bit longer on opening night than some, so encourage the kiddies to take an afternoon nap. See "Annie" tonight or Saturday at 8 or Sunday at 2 p.m., and again next weekend. Call (936) 441-7469 to reserve.

For a number of years, theater enthusiast JAMES CANFIELD has pursued his goal of establishing a local venue, ASIDE PRODUCTIONS.

Canfield's tenacity is paying off, even though Aside Productions' fate is lagging, as are many already established arts venues. Next up for Canfield (an AP founder and senior at St. Louis University) and the company is a statewide premier of "Anon(ymous)" by Naomi Lizuka.

Canfield describes it as an "entrancing adaptation of Homer's 'Odyssey,' and a beautiful, powerful play." Lead character Anon traverses across the country searching for his family while encountering a diverse group of eccentrics.

Starring in the effort are VIC SHUTTEE and CECILY BREAUX of The Woodlands High School; CODY DUE, second year student at Oklahoma University; JESSICA CANFIELD, second year student at St. Louis University; CHARLOTTE BYRD, second year student at WEBSTER UNIVERSITY in St. Louis, and SHELBY ESCAMILLA former student at Lone Star College.

"Anon(ymous)" plays Aug. 5, 6 and 7 at McCullough Junior High School, 3800 Panther Creek Drive in The Woodlands, with 7:30 p.m. performances. Admission is \$10. There is no word on suitability, but parental discretion likely is advised. Visit <http://asideproductions.org> .

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