

Perky Pippi's stunning voice is star of show

Rohan Preston

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THEATER REVIEW: The Children's Theatre revival of its adaptation of Astrid Lindgren's classic children's story is a ball of slapstick energy, a thrilling fantasia that gets punctured by thought and reality.

Call me a literalist clinging too tightly to reality. One question nagged me over the weekend amid all the energetic bonhomie surrounding "Pippi Longstocking." How could her pirate father just leave his motherless child to raise herself?

For most of Thomas Olson and Truda Stockenstrom's adaptation of Astrid Lindgren's original, Pippi (Jessie Shelton) is an orphan. Her father (Desmin Borges) is at sea. Her dead mother is in heaven, reachable by a dream in one of the production's most ravishing sequences.

When papa comes home, it's only for a minute. He wants her to join him on his adventures. But she has made friends with two kids, Annika (Maeven Moynihan) and Tommy (Nathan Barlow) and would rather stay on land. Dad tells her, rather cheerfully, to go on raising herself. See you sometime.

It is true that Lindgren's classic story is a fairy tale, a big-hearted fantasia of one little girl's moxie in the face of hardship and intrusive adults. Pippi, mostly alone in the world save for her pet monkey and the horse that lives

downstairs, frustrates the social worker who wants her to grow up in a nurturing home and go to school. She foils the inept thieves who have plans for the bag of loot that her daddy left her. She even disrupts order in a classroom, driving the teacher batty.

She is indomitable, a wild child with mismatched socks and a spirit that stretches to the moon. But I got snagged on the father's cavalier goodbye, and not just because there were little girls around us tearing up that Pippi does not have a daddy to sing her a lullaby at night or a mommy to read her bedtime stories.

Of course, "Pippi" is not supposed to be taken that deeply. Director and choreographer Matthew Howe draws on a variety of presentation styles for this brisk revival, including slapstick bits with Keystone Kops and Kriminals. Howe's reprise has some beautiful numbers, including a big dance with ropes.

And Shelton, the star of the show, delivers with a gorgeous voice, so much so that she sounds older than Pippi.

Still, there are also challenges. The production does not have a live orchestra, which shows in a couple of scenes. In one, the social worker, who battles with Pippi, also has to battle with the pre-recorded music as she delivers her song and starts to reveal her feelings for the little girl. The music and her feelings are unexpected. But so is much of "Pippi."

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'pippi Longstocking'

Who: Adapted by Thomas Olson and Truda Stockenstrom. Directed and choreographed by Matthew Howe.

When: 7 p.m. today-Wednesday, 7:30 p.m. Friday, 11 a.m. & 2 p.m. Saturday, 2 & 5 p.m. Sunday. Ends June 18.

Where: Children's Theatre, 2400 3rd Av. S., Minneapolis.

Tickets: \$13-\$34. 612-874-0400 or www.childrenstheatre.org.