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Pratfalls, silence transcend time

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Theater Critic

Dean Holt begins things with a backward somersault as his character wakes up to start the day. And as "Reeling" unspools over the course of an hour or so, he seldom stops.

Holt is the star and pretty much the *raison d'être* for the world premiere play at the Children's Theatre Company. Long regarded as one of the finest physical actors in the area, the rubber-limbed Holt gets the chance to use that skill in an homage to the days of silent movies.

He plays Little Fellow, a sad-sack reincarnation of Buster Keaton, complete with stone face and porkpie hat. Little Fellow lives for the affections of his Beloved (Rebecca Lord, with lips pursed and eyelashes in full flutter), who has stars in her eyes and wants to go to Hollywood.

He follows her and happens on all sorts of misadventures with the foul-tempered, aristocratic Big Man (Zach Curtis, whose dark, silent, fist-shaking bluster makes us hear Snidely Whiplash inside our heads) and a bevy of Keystone Kops.

Barry Kornhauser is credited with the script, which is comprised of a series of classic silent-film gags

and not a word of dialogue. Whatever can't be articulated through body language is spelled out — literally — in supertitles above the stage.



The physical comedy is familiar but timeless, and it's well executed. Holt totters on ladders, disappears down garbage cans and swims upstream against a wind machine.

All the while, he balances Little Fellow on that precarious edge between physical humor and physical peril. Magic resides at that tipping point, and Holt makes all the crashing around look effortless, human and even a little poignant in a virtuoso performance.

It's difficult for the live stage to capture the particular hyper-mania of the old movies. Director Peter Brosius, who imbues the whole

production with a slightly oversized quality, delivers a close approximation. Brosius' staging has a free-flowing feel but is deceptively disciplined, with a keen understanding that material like this is less directed than choreographed.

Joe Chvala works a Foley setup off to the side of the stage, providing the crunches, tinkles and assorted other sound effects that give the show an old-time feeling. There's even a winsome interplay of film and live performance at the show's end that links the traditions of stage and screen with grace and good humor.

Little kids won't understand the specifics of "Reeling's" context — my young theater-going partner couldn't figure out why no one was saying anything and was astonished when I explained to her that movies used to come without sound. But the show's roots lie in the time-transcendent soil of the pratfall and the struggle of the little guy to make good. From that fertile ground comes laughter — and wisdom — that rings loud and clear.

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