

Honk! if you like a merry musical with playful puns

Sat Dec 8 2007

By Kevin Prokosh

★★★★ out of 5

HONK! is no lame duck.

Ever since beating out the heavily favoured Disney's *The Lion King* and the ABBA musical *Mamma Mia!* to win the 2000 best musical Olivier Award in London, the children's barnyard fable has been accepted swimmingly on the other side of the pond.



Honk! is based on the Hans Christian Andersen story about an ugly duckling who turns out to be a beautiful swan. The English composing team of George Stiles (music) and Anthony Drewe (book and lyrics) freshens the timeless tale of a cygnet cruelly nicknamed Ugly with a heavy dose of puns and cheeky humour. Winnipeg designer Leanne Foley whimsically dresses up the Manitoba Theatre for Young People holiday show with a pop-up-book set design and stylish pond-wear that might be described as Victorian chick.

Fun puns

While Stiles' jaunty music, played live by a three-piece band, is serviceable it is not memorable. It is Drewe's outrageous puns that audience members, mainly adults, will exit the theatre repeating and giggling about. Bull Frog, who longs to be kissed and turned into a prince, sighs resignedly, "Who wants to French a frog?" Ugly's mom, Ida, grumbles to her absentee husband Drake, "It doesn't do for a duck to look sheepish; it confuses the other animals."

At over 80 uninterrupted minutes, *Honk!* is a bit of an attention-span test for the more recently hatched audience members observed at a school performance on Thursday. The central conflict between someone who looks different and an intolerant world that teases him constantly will be easy for young viewers to identify with. They will especially respond to a barnyard villain, a hungry cat, who refers to his cookbook, *Recipes for an Unlucky Duck*, before having Ugly over for lunch.

Director Chris Sigurdson has all his ducks in a row starting with four Winnipeg child actors -- Hayden Bytheway, Connor Coughlin, Abbey Thickson and Montana Lehmann -- who play Ugly's unkind, unaccepting siblings as well as dancing froglets. At six-foot-two, the gangly Tim Gledhill towers over the youngsters, accentuating their physical differences. Gledhill captures the sting of ostracism especially the song *Different*.

Plucky

Debbie Maslowsky also stands out as the plucky Ida, who exhibits warm maternal charm and a fine singing voice best displayed in *The Joy of Motherhood* and the poignant ballad *Every Tear a Mother Cries*.

Frank Zotter' Cat, in his fur bolero over a fire-engine red suit, is saucy feline fun, especially in his solo *Play With Your Food*, although he needs to work on his coughing up a furball. Simon Miron is ribbiting as the bowler-hatted Bull Frog during his comic tune *Warts and All*. Leading ladies Jennifer Lyon and Jan Skene bring veteran presence to secondary roles.

Honk! has something important to say about being different in an increasingly multicultural society, but it's content to amuse rather than moralize.

© 2007 Winnipeg Free Press. All Rights Reserved.