

## Broadway Live Insider

Michael J. Miller

ANNIE: Review

“Go ahead, Annie, it’s still a free country.”

In early September, three weeks before the curtain rose for audiences at the Landmark Theatre in Syracuse, New York, the cast and creatives of the new national tour of ANNIE were hard at work, rehearsing and getting ready to take their tour across the country. 25 team members from the creative team joined the cast and crew for three intensive weeks of rehearsals.

According to Syracuse officials, the team’s 1,300 nights in local hotels and visits to local restaurants, bars, grocery stores and other attractions during the rehearsal period added to an economic benefit of more than \$1.5 million to the local economy.

And now they’re here.

The production, which opened Thursday night as part of the new season of Broadway Live at the Lexington Opera House, travels with 64 people and two dogs – including managers, performers, technicians, a teacher for the children, as well as an animal trainer.

That’s exciting news for the local economy, surely, but at the end of the day, it’s even better news for those of us who get a chance to see this sparkling, inspiring new production just four weeks after it first opened in upstate New York.

With book by Thomas Meehan, music by Charles Strouse, and Martin Charnin’s endearing lyrics, this dazzling production reminds us why ANNIE has been delighting audiences for over 45 years.

The orphans are, of course, key to any ANNIE, and this plucky bunch is adept with their hard knock buckets and fully dressed with toothsome smiles, but what set this production apart from others I’ve seen is a welcomed attention to detail and subtle excellence in the adult cast that surround them. It’s clear that the director of this production, Jenn Thompson, who made her stage debut as the orphan Pepper in the 1977 Broadway cast, knows a few things about how to ANNIE.

Christopher Swan and Julia Nicole Hunter bring a less “lovey-dovey” vibe to their roles as Oliver Warbucks and his secretary Grace Ferrell, and I found that it actually worked better than some others I’ve seen.

Stephanie Londino’s engaging take on Mrs. Hannigan actually made me rethink her. Imagine Mrs. Hannigan as an attractive woman stuck in a dead-end government job, in it, yes, for the pay and benefits, but perhaps still dreaming of something... more.

Never fear, ANNIE is awesome, too. Ellie Pulsifer starts strong and stays captivatingly winsome in the title role. We’ve all powered through other preteen Annies with their cloyingly sweet

screeching (there, I said it). Young Ms. Pulsifer sings with just-right resonance that adds a gentle gravitas to the role. Spunky or streetwise? World-weary or naïve? Perhaps only her rescue mutt Sandy knows for sure.

A show as enduring as ANNIE comes with its markers of excellence or mediocrity for those of us who've seen it multiple times over the decades. Perhaps for you it's the extent to which the orphans hit their marks during "Hard Knock Life" or whether or not Sandy cooperates by standing still next to Annie's side during "Tomorrow". You're my age if you remember Andrea McArdle having a bit of trouble with Sandy during her performance on the 1977 Tony Awards broadcast on CBS. (look it up on YouTube, kids)

My ANNIE Moment of Truth has always been when an actress from the ensemble takes to a spotlight during the first act production number "N.Y.C." and belts: "N.Y.C., Just got here this morning! Three bucks, Two bags, one ME!!!" I'm pleased to report Jataria Heyward, making her National Tour debut, nails it here. Welcome to the rest of your life, Ms. Heyward. I think you're going to like it here.

INSIDER Thoughts: I'd like to close this review with a special nod to Luanne Franklin and Sheila Kenny, two members of the team of professionals who bring Broadway Live to Lexington and engaged me as the Broadway Live Insider many seasons ago. They've both recently announced their respective retirements and their contributions to the local arts scene are to be commended. Thanks to their passion and steadfast work through the years, the Lexington Opera House is well positioned to shine like the top of the Chrysler building (or should I say Central Bank Center) for generations to come.