

Blue Castle renovated

Revamped Stinson show a successful but inconsistent pastiche

BY SEAN MCQUAID

YOU GOTTA LOVE PRINCE EDWARD Island. Where else can you get so much Lucy Maud Montgomery fare so often? With the Anne of Green Gables license plates in circulation, Lucy Maud probably even beats out the ubiquitous potato as a pervasive provincial presence. The latest Lucy Maud labour of love is Hank Stinson's *Blue Castle*, a musical stage adaptation of the beloved Montgomery novel by that name. The usual Montgomerian sentimental escapism prevails, complete with the mandatory starry-eyed heroine, but it's a nice little show with some catchy tunes, creditable performances, and a heart-string-plucking plot that even some of us crustier curmudgeons may get an inkling of a warm, rosy glow from.

For those unfamiliar with the story, the heroine this time is Valancy Sterling (a name Anne of Green Gables would have killed for), played by Kelti MacMillan. Valancy (whose family has nicknamed her Dos) smothers under her family's efforts to run her life and marry her off while remaining blissfully oblivious to her feelings. The crisis comes when Valancy's doctor informs her she has only about a year to live. Determined to make the most of the time she has left, Valancy leaves the bosom of her stifling, snobbish, upper-crust family to find independence and gainful employment as

nurse to Cissy Gay (played by Nancy McLure), the seriously ill daughter of notorious town drunkard "Roaring" Abel (played by Sandy Clark). Despite her scandalized relatives' denunciation of her, and their efforts to force her back into their home, Valancy clings to her newfound freedom by marrying infamous town outcast Barney Snaith (played by Doug Buell), finding unexpected happiness, love, herself, and more than a few surprises.

Performances are, for the most part, good. Kelti MacMillan sings and acts her way into the crowd's hearts capably, and is much more genuine than her predecessor in the original *Blue Castle* production last year. Clark and Buell, if somewhat lacking in polish, bring an endearingly folksy charm to their respective roles. Buell, particularly, is compellingly earnest and likeable in his role as Barney Snaith (though he and Clark still have problems with clearly and audibly performing the dauntingly long-winded "Getting the Lead out of Lizzy" tune). Valancy's meddling relatives have their moments, too: Valerie C. Moore is coldly imperious as Valancy's domineering mother;

Mae Ames (as Cousin Stickles) is one of those *Road to Avonlea*-surplus gossips that you love to hate; and Raymond Moore starts slow but picks up steam (and laughs) throughout in the role of Valancy's pompous, meddling humbug of an uncle, Benjamin (who's as stiff as *Star Wars*'s C-3PO, and twice as annoying).

Rounding out the family is the promising Kelly O'Neill, who plays Valancy's attention-starved cousin, Olive, with relish.

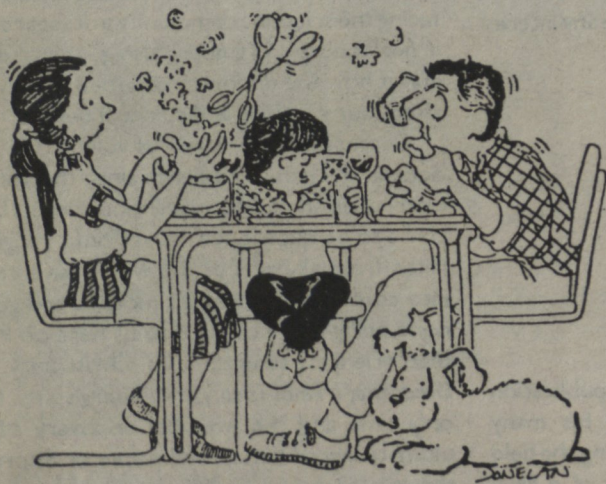
The Confederation Centre's Main Stage production opens up new possibilities for the musical in this revival production-- a more impressive set and

expanded musical accompaniment are the most obvious benefits-- but the revamped and rewritten production is in some ways inferior to the original show. Songs and scenes have been added, dropped, and rearranged, and not always for the better. The title song ("Blue Castle") is Valancy's theme and was one of the first numbers in the original production, providing a common thread with the song's repetition later in the play, but it's cut from the opening scenes in this version and comes out

of left field later on. The current production opens with a big ensemble production number depicting the town's springtime celebrations; it's certainly more lively than the old opening, but it's insubstantial filler, made worse by the fact that the chorus and musicians were (at least on Saturday night) so unsynchronous and cacophonous as to be almost completely incomprehensible in terms of whatever the lyrics might have been or who any of the characters were (the only thing that can be taken from it with any certainty after the dust settles is that it's springtime). In other spots, the rearranging of scenes and situations is conspicuous. The increased emphasis on Olive's scene-stealing engagement announcement during Valancy's birthday party is an effective device, but the attempt to remodel the birthday song into a generic well-wishes tune is awkward and forced. Similarly, the scene in which Barney and Abel formally introduce themselves to Valancy is pushed up to a later time in the show after they and Valancy have already met, making it seem out-of-place and a bit less natural.

While the modifications of Stinson's work were often unsatisfying, the musical as a whole remains a pleasant and satisfying affair with a lot of fun singing and dancing and more than a few catchy numbers. If it's revived again, in whatever form, it'll probably be worth a look

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I hope you realize that your heterosexuality will not necessarily prejudice my eventual affectional-preference choice.

