

THE GREAT ADVENTURE

...opened for its last performance on September fourth, and the crowds were enthusiastic even if the critics weren't. One could look at the show's fortunes as a microcosm of the country whose history it chronicles, Canada: an impressive but underrated phenomenon.

Canadians often shy away from the idea of patriotism. It's that golly-gee-whiz, self-effacing mindset that perhaps prods critics to look doubtfully upon anything that tries to make a big deal of our checkered past, thinking it a forced attempt at self-glorification, especially at a time when Canada is both celebrating its national birthday and yet again arguing over how to define itself in the constitution. THE GREAT ADVENTURE doesn't really preach patriotism, though, nor does it try to force a single definition of Canada upon us. What it does instead is celebrate the diversity of the Canadian people and their histories, and the titanic and sometimes tragic efforts made to hold these diverse elements together as an alliance richer than any one of its parts. It's not the country itself but its people that define its character, and as the show's recurring theme song often asks, "What is a country without its people?" There's no hard sell. All the show does is show you the people, and when you see them in all their vices and virtues you cannot help but identify with them and to sympathize with their struggle to unite. In their differences, the people who come to make up Canada are almost like a microcosm of the brotherhood of humankind that seems both an impossible and an immaculate conception. You can't help but root for the people as they struggle for unity, and the less jaded among us might even feel a twinge of pride as we watch the Fathers of Confederation put pen to paper in the end, as most of us hope to see our leaders do again.

National pride aside, THE GREAT ADVENTURE isn't a bad little production from an artistic standpoint. One complaint of some of the critics was that the musical lacked a plot, but that just isn't the case. The show does jump back and forth from one era to another as it chronicles Canadian history, but it's more than a collection of cultural vignettes, thanks to a clever framing sequence that unites all the disparate tales. This framing sequence involves, fittingly enough, a train station. Trains had once been instrumental in founding and uniting our country but can no longer compete with other forms of transportation, and are gradually being phased out of use. As the musical opens, the abandoned train station in question has become a hangout for juvenile delinquents and is slated for demolition. That's why a retired railway man named Charlie (played by Bill Hosie) comes back on this day to reminisce and finds instead a gang of street punks, one of whom he takes under his wing in an attempt to explain what made the station so special and what makes Canada special, trying to pass on his appreciation of his country and its history and in so doing give the cynical boy something to

believe in. Both Charlie and the boy, Cayo (played capably by Craig Fair), find each other as orphans. Both have lost their families and both are also orphans in a larger sense, Charlie watching his past disappear and Cayo as a child without a purpose or future. The musical's story or conflict comes in Cayo finding something to believe in as Charlie's storytelling brings different eras of Canadian history to life, and it also follows the tentative friendship that develops between these loners as they come to share a dream. There's even some more forceful suspense in the countdown to the station's destruction as the two friends go on their vision quest inside it.

Story aside, a major element of any musical is the music, and this musical delivers more than its share of tuneful numbers. One of the most satisfying things about the production musically is its impressive variety. As the show progresses the production showcases songs from just about every era of musical history, beginning with the streetdance that opens the show in "Invitation to a Rap", and moving on to include numbers like "Rainbow in my Mind" a very Sixties number which reminds us that not all of the flower children were down in Woodstock. At the same time it plays up the similarities between that spiritual movement and the naturalistic philosophy of Native Americans, a people with whom many children of the Sixties felt a great kinship. As the use of aboriginal peoples indicates, the songs reflect Canada's cultural diversity. Another number is a ballet set to a hauntingly beautiful Acadian ballad (sung partially in French, no less). Other songs ranged from the boisterous tunes of the Roaring Twenties to some beautifully bluesy, melancholy numbers from the Great Depression, including the charmingly downbeat hobo's lament entitled "Boxcar 501", and the far more upbeat "Footloose and Fancy Free". The show provides a wide spectrum of music for all to enjoy.

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