

Duets and Davidsons Highlight 'Shenandoah'

By TOM WRONA

Here's my idea of a great musical: anything by Rodgers and Hammerstein (e.g., "The King and I," "State Fair," "Oklahoma"); or Lerner and Loewe (e.g., "My Fair Lady," "Camelot," "Brigadoon"). Rightly or wrongly, they're the standard by which I measure all other musical writing teams. I usually have a hard time warming up to musicals that don't bear at least a superficial resemblance to their model like, for instance, anything by Webber and Rice (e.g., "Cats," "Evita," "Jesus Christ Superstar").

Do you see a pattern here? To me the term "musical" is short for "musical comedy." So what chance does a musical *drama* from the two-hit wonders (their other show was "Purlie") Geld and Udell stand of making me happy?

Not much. But the Surflight's production of "Shenandoah" surprised me and one song in it was so unexpectedly beautiful, I actually got choked up.

The play is based on the (non-musical) 1965 Jimmy Stewart movie of the same name and some of the dialogue in the play is taken directly from the movie. (TCM has been playing it lately and I caught it last week.) It's the story of a freethinking Virginia farmer named Charlie Anderson (John Davidson) and his family enduring the Civil War. Anderson has no use for the war or government or God, and he doesn't want his boys or his horses to be taken by any of them.

It's a large brood. There are five sons, daughter Jenny (Davidson's real life daughter Ashleigh), and daughter-in-law Anne (Carrie Tillis). The standout among the boys is the youngest (Andrew Troum), who is inexplicably called simply "Boy." (The play's program, unlike the movie's credits, does indicate his given name is Robert.)

Boy is friends with a young slave boy named Gabriel, who will be played at alternating performances by identical twin brothers Robert Kyle Harris and Ryan Harris. Ryan played the role at the dress rehearsal I caught Tuesday night and I liked him and Troum in their singing and dancing duet, "Why Am I Me?"

I also enjoyed watching

two former colleagues do well in minor roles: moonlighting *SandPaper* sports editor Rick Mellerup as the sleazy horse trader (or is that horse thief?) Tinkham; and H. Kneeland Whiting (who was in a short film of mine) as a Confederate lieutenant.

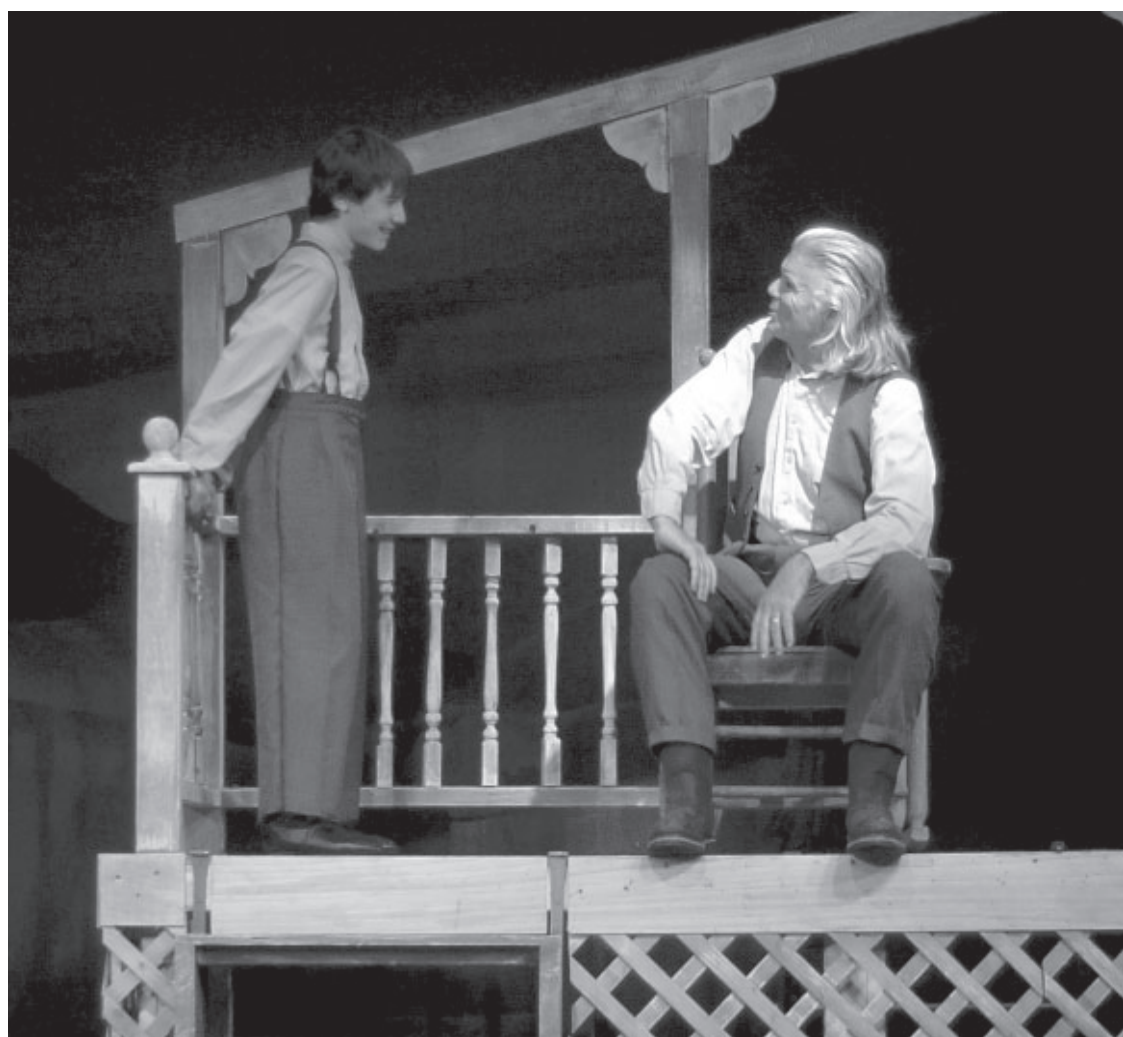
I had some minor questions about the decisions made by some very talented people. The family dinner table was a conventional one that put some actors' backs to the audience. I don't know if that was scenic designer Ted LeFevre's call or director Steve Steiner's, but I think a more fanciful one that had all the characters at least partially facing the audience might have worked better. And I wish Steiner had reined in Matty Price's overacting as Sam in the scene where the nervous suitor asks Charlie for Jenny's hand in marriage. Price is an able actor but his histrionics seemed over the top against John Davidson's calm and masterful portrayal of Charlie.

As always Davidson delivers the goods. He could have phoned this one in but his concentration and earnestness bespeak a respect and love of the audience that endears him to his fans.

I loved Davidson *père et fille* in last year's "State Fair" but I was mesmerized when Jenny sits with her father as he sings "Papa's Gonna Make It Alright" in this one. At first I remembered it as a duet but Jenny doesn't reprise it until two songs later. As she sat at her father's knee, the simple, unadorned affection between them was so genuine and palpable I remembered words that weren't there.

Young Davidson does have a duet with Carrie Tillis when the story's sisters-in-law celebrate their friendship in "We Make a Beautiful Pair." It was a pretty song and it hit me like a ton of bricks. My eyes welled with tears. I really don't know why. Again, I mis-remembered and thought the Davidson "duet" set me up for it. But that came after this song. It was the damndest thing. It's fun when a work of art can do that to you.

I'll never like musical drama as much as musical comedy. "Shenandoah" isn't one of my favorites. But I did find it more moving than I



bargained for. Perhaps you will, too.

Evening performances run through June 18 at 8 p.m. (except June 5 and 12), with matinees at 2 p.m. on June 2, 5, 7, 12, 14 and 16.

Bonus Broadway Buff Trivia Question: This one isn't

exactly about Broadway history but I couldn't resist. There's a surprising geographical connection between Beach Haven and the Shenandoah Valley. What is it? I'll give you the answer June 17 when I review Surflight's Trump Plaza production of "Cabaret."

Tom Wrona is a writer and filmmaker based in Barnegat. You can let him know what you think of his reviews at tom@dangerous-movies.com. And for more Island-area entertainment tidbits, visit his web site at wrona.com.



Photos by Ryan Morrill

CURTAIN UP: 'Shenandoah' is open for a three-week run starring John Davidson (top and above, right) as a Virginia farmer trying to keep his family out of the Civil War. Also starring are (top) Andrew Troum and (above, left to right) Ashleigh Davidson and Carrie Tillis.