

THEATER REVIEW | YOU'RE A GOOD MAN, CHARLIE BROWN

Peanuts characters continue to connect with fans young, old

By Margaret Quamme

FOR THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

A comic strip that reruns material first published 40 years ago wouldn't seem to have much chance of attracting children.

But judging by the delighted audience reaction at Wednesday's preview of the Otterbein College production of *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*, the Peanuts gang still has what it takes. Under the steady hand of director Valerie Accetta Thalassinis, the two-act musical is effortlessly charming.

The version sticks to the basic characters, those who dominated the strip in the 1950s and '60s: Charlie Brown, Lucy, Linus, Sally, Schroeder and Snoopy. The plot is minimal: The characters make their way through a typical day, going to school, playing baseball, chatting with one another and, in Charlie Brown's case, trying to fly a kite.

Larger production numbers are punctuated with brief skits — the length of a comic strip or two — but pack a punch.

The actors, to good effect, treat their characters as small people rather than exaggerating their childishness. Like the Charles M. Schulz comic strip, the musical is more interested in the qualities that children and adults share than in what separates them.

Daniel Everidge's Charlie Brown has a steady warmth and inherent hopefulness, even in the face of constant failure. Cassie Barker nicely underplays the potentially obnoxious Lucy, emphasizing her implacable, serene self-confidence instead of her crabbiness.

Drew Aber's Schroeder exhibits a suitably dramatic intensity. James Sargent's Linus is tranquilly philosophical in

► Otterbein College Theatre will present *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown* at 8 tonight and Saturday night, and 2 p.m. Sunday, in Cowan Hall, 30 S. Grove St., Westerville. Tickets cost \$15, or \$10 for children younger than 12. Call 614-823-1109.

the face of his demanding older sister. Sara Alvarez's Sally is a dainty dynamo, and Kyle Bailey takes a likable, understated approach to Snoopy's physical comedy.

The actors are also strong musically, and their singing is supported niftily by a six-member band directed by Dennis Davenport.

Complex musical numbers such as the witty *Glee Club Rehearsal* and the quirky *The Book Report* unfold with ease. Stella Hiatt Kane's generally unobtrusive choreography gets a chance to shine with Snoopy's dance-hall tribute to *Supper Time*.

The simple, playful set designed by Suzanne Accetta (the director's mother) pays tribute to the original comic strip: Triple arches covered with enlarged pieces of the strip frame a bare stage. Jayson Pritchard's lighting sets the mood of even the briefest of scenes as the back wall changes color or shifts to a scene of stylized but luscious sun and clouds.

The musical is paced well, although it does have lulls: *The Beethoven Day* and *Red Baron* segments drag on longer than they should.

No play has universal appeal, but *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown* comes close. It offers a warm but unsentimental tribute to the difficulties and delights of ordinary human life, and adults as well as children will recognize themselves in it.