



‘Bright Star’ dazzles with story, music, performances



Shelly Stewart Banks/Olathe Civic Theatre Association

The newest production at Olathe Civic Theatre Association (OCTA), “Bright Star” outshines all previous productions and sets a new, higher standard for all Kansas City community theatres.

This production equals or surpasses most equity or traveling productions that have graced KC Metro stages in the past five years. Yes, it’s that good. The combination of a strong story (loosely based on truth); Bluegrass music performed by Iron Mountain Pickers, an ensemble of strong acting performances (some playing against type), and the concept of director Julie Ewing made “Bright Star” the consummate production of the

year.



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Even with its small performance area, no wings for props or scenery changes, and limited space for an orchestra, OCTA achieved a theatrical masterpiece. "Bright Star" adapted from the story of the "Iron Mountain Baby," with music and lyrics by Steve Martin and Edie Brickell. The Broadway version never gained traction, closing after about 110 performances.

What a shame the story did not resonate with New York audiences. The story has a sweet charm, realistic characters, a dynamic musical score, and heartbreaking reality as it takes the viewers to North Carolina in the mid-1940s just after WWII. The story flashes back to the mid-1920s religious mores and values. The actual story occurred in Missouri, but poetic license and added elements created a beautiful poignant story.



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Shame, dishonor, adoption, social-standing, and scriptures, rip a family apart after an unplanned pregnancy. The anguish of knowing, not-knowing, and abandonment cannot overcome love, hope, and anticipation in this touching, inspirational musical theatre piece.

Now with "Bright Star" available to community theatres and smaller venues, the show will finally attract the audiences and recognition it deserves. As the show generates more productions, the story will become a classic. Other shows with less story, heart, and weaker musical scores have won many awards. "Bright Star" somehow never received the respect it deserves.



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Rectified by OCTA's production, audiences will sing the praises through the Kansas City market and clamor for more productions. Tickets will go fast and sellouts are expected. A 30-minute Bluegrass performance begins 30 minutes prior to curtain-time and sets the tone for the evening performance to

follow. The Iron Mountain Pickers, a nine-piece mostly stringed instrument band entertains as the theatre auditorium fills.

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The story centers on Billy Crane who comes home from WWII, discovers his mother has passed away, and decides to fulfill his dream of becoming an author. The story flashes back to another two families with teenage children who struggle with family values and morals. Their impending love story stokes the flames of the endearing story filled with obstacles and heartache. As the story develops, cruelty, social position, and religious beliefs create entanglements. The story is gripping from start to finish with so many standout performances.



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The love story involves Jimmy Ray and Alice. Each is

convincingly played by Austin Stang and Ashton Botts. The chemistry they generate grabs the audience from their first scene, and the following scenes just continue the momentum. They make the audience believe they are the characters and that they possess a level of unrequited love throughout the piece. Their voices are both strong and contain just enough country overtones to make each song believable.

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Two other performances that struck this reviewer were those of Charles Christensen and Reed Uthe, both known mostly for lighter characters. In "Bright Star," both are heavy, hard characters with no redeeming characteristics. Both men showed characters not seen from them before, and both were excellent in their delivery of them.

One particular scene among Ashton Botts, Charles Christensen and Peggy Moll absolutely presents the dramatic turn in the story-line. The scene, powerful, gripping, and shocking, takes the story into a new level of depth and reality. Outstanding work from all three actors grabbed and held the audience through this shocking element of the plot.

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To say more of the plot and story would ruin the “Wow=factor” for future audiences, but the story continues to unfold with interesting twists and turns.

The supporting cast all give amazing performances. Even the small parts add to the story. A few light lines sprinkled into the dialogue keep the story from being a downer. A light comedy musical number also lightens the mood. The vocal performances by the cast are well-directed and consistent with the mood.

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OCTA set a new standard for their productions with “Bright Star.” Other theatre companies and directors need to see magic occur in a limited space. But, seriously, this production cannot be topped. BRAVO! to OCTA, the cast, the crew, and

technicians that created this production.

The cast includes Ashton Botts (Alice Murphy), Nathan Bills (Billy Cane), Matt Walberg (Daddy Cane), Willa Walberg (Margo), Christopher Morgan (Max), Sharon Johnson (Florence), Cassandra Pettigrew (Edna), Tyler Hileman (Darryl), Patty Whitlock (Lucy), Peggy Mall (Mama Murphy), Charles Christesson Jr. (Daddy Murphy), Reed Uthe (Mayor Dobbs), Austin Stang (Jimmy Ray Dobbs), Jonathan Arnold (Stanford), Andrew Ramaley (Dr. Norquist), Valerie Knott (Government Clerk), and Kelli Mattison (Well-Dressed Woman).



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Wonderful musical direction came from Ashley Jones and the Bluegrass band assembled for this production. The music and the performance of the music made the show blend so well among actors, story, and music. The Band: Guitar – Colvin Hooser, Banjo – Jay Kassen, Mandolin – Mike Stewart, Mandolin Sub 9/7 – David Ludwick, Fiddle – Ahafia Jurkiewicz-Miles, Piano – Jonnie Brice, Cello – Kieran Ojakangas, Bass – Andrew Ramaley, and Drums – John Gilmore.

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The entire production was the concept of director Julie Ewing whittled down a Broadway musical to the confines of OCTA's space. She was joined by Ashley Jones as musical director who conducted the Iron Mountain Pickers. The others on the creative team include: Carolyn Braverman (choreographer), Matt Pollock (stage manager), Jade Almsberger (asst. stage manager/asst. costumer), Philip Leonard (lighting designer), Joshua Finch (sound designer), Ken Schmidt (set designer), Alisha Morris (set construction/props designer), Heather Stewart (costume designer), Brittany Becker (sound board operator); Ella Amos, Nora Bishop, Brandon Heflin, Emily Heflin, Kayli Kimerer, Sheridan Sears, and Nicholas Sibert (set builders).

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"Bright Star" continues weekends through Sept. 15, at Olathe Civic Theatre Association (OCTA). For tickets, go to the [OCTA website](#). Opening night, Aug. 30 was sold out. Saturday, Aug. 31 was 95 percent full. Word of mouth and publicity will sell out most performances. Book tickets soon or miss the show.

Tags: "Bright Star" review, OCTA, Olathe Civic Theatre Association, Kansas City Theatre, Kansas City Performing Arts, Kansas City Arts & Entertainment