

‘Joseph’ worth seeing more than once

By Mary Gales Askren

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Dazzling.

Delightful.

Playful.

Fun.

Intoxicating.

No list of adjectives can describe the experience of seeing “Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat” at the Black Hills Playhouse, primarily because it will leave those who attend starstruck.

Granted, starting with a work by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice gives the playhouse’s creative crew solid material with which to work, but they have made it their own. Matt Nesmith, who portrayed Tito Mirelli with such panache in “Lend Me a Tenor,” stepped behind the scenes this time to direct “Joseph.”

In a talk back Saturday afternoon, in which he and others responsible for the enchanting production talked about their process, Nesmith said he wanted to keep ‘Joseph’ grounded in the 1960s. That’s when Webber and Rice started working on it, writing a 15-minute pop cantata for a high school performance. Only after the success of “Jesus Christ Superstar” were they able to revise it into its present shape.

Nesmith said he wanted to capture the shaping culture on the stage. He sent scene designer Valerie Light album covers from that period, telling her that he was looking for something along the lines of “Cream (a British rock band from the 60s which included Eric Clapton, Jack Bruce and Ginger Baker) meets the Partridge Family (an American sitcom about a family that embarks on a music career).”

“I try to give the designers some ideas with which to work,” Nesmith said, explaining that he doesn’t tell them specifically what he wants. He did say he wanted to give “Joseph” a unique spin.

Scene designer Valerie Light said during the talk back that she was thrilled with the guidance Nesmith provided. She read his email, and said to herself, “We’re going to have some fun.”

Because Nesmith wanted to keep the production grounded in the 1960s, an era when hippies would pile in a VW van and head somewhere, they landed on the idea of creating the image of the cast as a touring company. That, in turn, led to the idea of using a traveling wagon as the set’s central element.

“Once we settled on the idea of building a traveling wagon, we had to settle on what we were going to do,” Light said.

The caravan was built on a rotating platform, which was pushed into place so that different sides could be used for different scenes. This proved to be one of the delightful elements of the playhouse’s production. Both the set and the props used the intense, dynamic colors that dominated the 1960s.

Putting it together, especially in 10 days, was a challenge for the entire technical crew, according to Light.

“The conversations were along the line of ‘Can we make this thing?’” she said.

Because the set and props were so incredibly vivid, costume designer Rachel Mathews said she knew she couldn't use the tie-dyed look that was so popular in the 1960s, or the costumes would be lost on the stage, so she toned down the palette a little, introducing earth tones. The exception, of course, was Joseph's coat.

"Every designer wants to design her own coat," Mathews said. Her coat was hand-painted with inserts of brightly-colored calico.

"It was a labor of love for the crew," she said, explaining that they worked "hours and hours" on it.

Choreographer Patricia Downey said her job was to show character development with movement. She said she worked to reinforce ideas developed by other designers, and to also incorporate "some ionic movements from the disco era."

The cast contributed to the magic the designers began with their imaginations and hard work. The actors began even before showtime by becoming the touring company Nesmith envisioned, singing, juggling, doing short readings, interacting with the audience.

Once the show started, the spell was cast, and those who braved the storm on Saturday night to attend were transported to the wonderland of song and dance.

Martha Stai, who appeared briefly in "Lend Me a Tenor" as Mirelli's wife Maria, was well cast in the role of the Narrator in "Joseph." When she stepped into the limelight, she had a dynamic stage presence as well as a beautiful voice. However, she could fade into the background when others were carrying the scene or when she was part of an ensemble number.

Those cast as brothers did an incredible job of establishing individual personalities with the gestures and mannerisms, even though none of them had significant solos with which to create these characters. However, several of the actors were also cast in other roles.

Most notable was Ryan Landis in the role of the Pharaoh, which was written to be portrayed as Elvis. Landis managed to capture the King's mannerisms, especially that pelvic rock that was so controversial in Presley's early years. However, Justin Morin as Potiphar was delightful and Alan Jones as the butler was amusing. J.J. Gatesman was interesting to watch, both as Asher, one of the brothers, and as the baker, simply because he played the lead role of Max in "Lend Me a Tenor." His professionalism was evident in his ability to step back into a supporting role.

Although they did not have individual parts, the female members of the ensemble definitely had a stage presence. With several costume changes and roles in almost every scene, they did much to create the ambience of the production.

The role of Jacob was played by artistic director Dan Workman, who appeared to be having fun with it.

Joseph was played with breath-taking sincerity by Iah Kinley. His acting as well as his voice created the character, and did so powerfully. "Joseph" would have been good, maybe even great, without him, but he took the production one step beyond to truly "I have to see this again" memorable.

"Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat" will show through July 17, with evening performances July 5-9 and 12-16, and matinees on July 9, 10, 16 and 17.