

'The Best Christmas Pageant Ever' is a Funny and Touching Family Affair

By Sophie Braccini



From left: Megan Crane, Brodie Zeigler, Nat Hacoen, and Hannah Hacoen. Photo Stu Stelland

There is no better family outing to start the holiday season than going together to a live, festive performance. This year Town Hall Theatre offers that perfect opportunity: a show for all ages, by an all-ages cast in the seasonal appropriate "The Best Christmas Pageant Ever."

The play, based on the 1971 book by Barbara Robinson, tells how a traditional and somewhat boring event gets derailed and invigorated when a group of misfit kids take over the leading roles of the local production of the traditional Christmas Pageant. The effective staging by Lynda Di Vito, directing a cast of very funny and talented actors age 7 to 60, delivers a very witty performance with nonstop surprises and humor. The sweet ending is also perfectly appropriate for a family audience.

In a little town not unlike one of our own in Lamorinda, in the early 80s, the Christmas Pageant is a big yearly affair led by the same group of volunteer mothers who have made it an event that runs like clockwork. But the main woman in charge breaks a leg the year the six

children from the Herdman family — the local somewhat delinquent and misfits of the town — happen to decide it could be fun to join in. The whole pageant is sent topsyturvy, as the self-righteous people of the town think it is going to be a disaster, and for a while it clearly looks that way. But this would not be a Holiday story without a little Christmas miracle in the end.

The cast of children, teens and adults that bring the story to life are simply terrific. The little ones are adorable, the teens who play either the right-thinking well-bred ones or the abominable Herdmans are impressively professional and funny, while the adults are just as strong and perfectly cast. Di Vito says that for a director, the devil is in the casting. For her directorial debut she made a faultless choice.

"It was fun and challenging to direct this cast," says Di Vito. Twelve children are in the play as well as six adults. Di Vito says that she enjoyed the casting process. She is a veteran equity actress who has been on stages from New York to Europe to the Bay Area over the last 20 years.

She says she's worked with the best directors and when it came time for her to take the helm she first started with analyzing and thinking about the play that had been offered to her. "My goal was to find the heart of this work," she says. Her vision is that the Herdmans are not only elements of disturbance; they are also elements of rejuvenation of the traditional story. Several times in the text it appears that these kids are poor and that Marie and Joseph might have been also in extreme poverty when Jesus was born.

Di Vito also brought her own touch to the play, adding songs and comic elements that really work well and get a lot of laughs.

"The Best Christmas Pageant Ever" will run at Town Hall Theatre in Lafayette from Dec. 3 through Dec. 17. Visit www.TownHallTheatre.com or call 925.283.1557 for tickets and more information.

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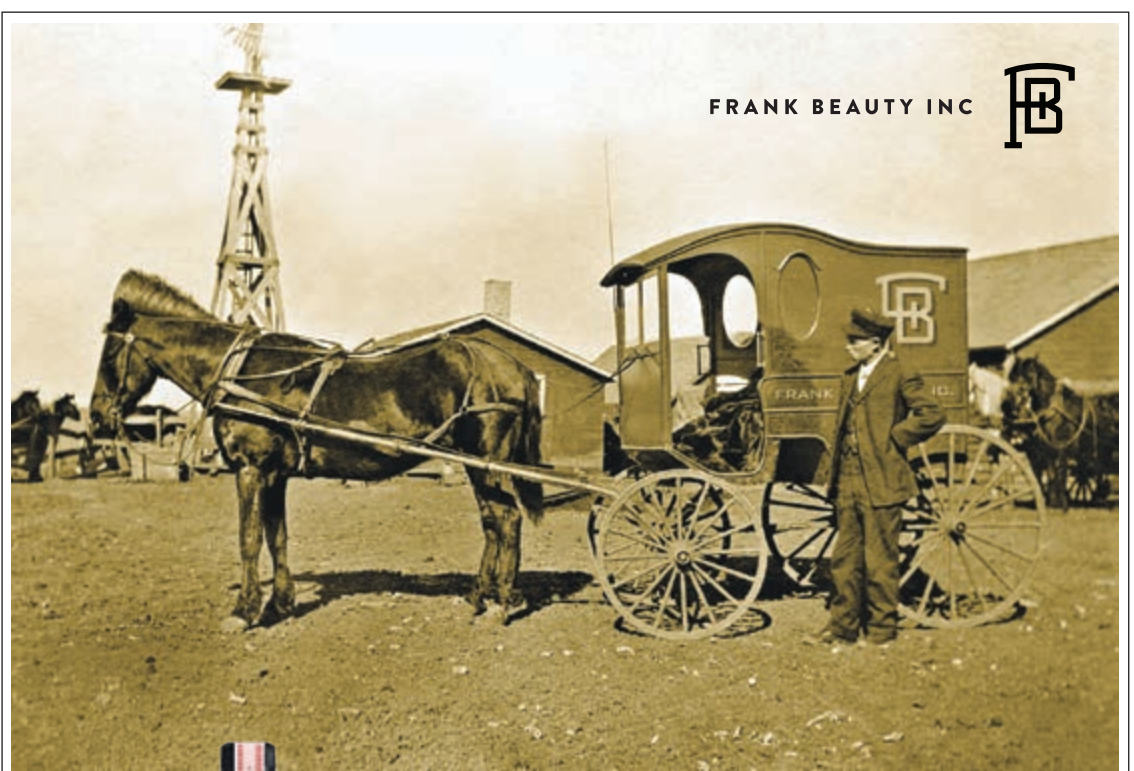


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