

“Quality live entertainment”

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My wife and I and another couple attended a dramatic production last weekend in Rolla.

I don't have a great deal of experience with “plays,” but like most people I think I'm a pretty fair judge of the ingredients that make up good acting versus bad. So, being relatively quick to be skeptical about things that involve potential disappointment, I went into the evening's outing with a bit of trepidation.

It didn't last.

The venue is known as the Cedar Street Playhouse. It's a converted church building to the east of U.S. 63, not far from Rolla High School.

As soon as we set foot inside, my friend Steve and I both sort of nodded and said, “this isn't bad.” We had paid for tickets online, so the four of us went to the will-call station, bought a couple of bottles of water at the concession stand, and went upstairs to our seats in the front row of the balcony.

The group putting on the show goes by the name Fine Linen Theatre, and on the schedule that night was “The Miracle Worker,” the real-life story of Helen Keller (an American author, political activist and lecturer who was the first deaf and blind person to ever earn a bachelor's degree) and her teacher, Annie Sullivan. It's a familiar story set in Alabama the late 1880s, made famous by the 1962 movie by the same name, starring Anne Bancroft and Patty Duke.

Looking around from our comfortable seats, it became obvious this wasn't going to be a skimpy, weak production. The lighting was elaborate and professional, the sound equipment looked more than just adequate and the set on the spacious stage was fabricated with care and detail.

When the lights went down, mere moments past before one was totally drawn in by the actors' portrayals of their characters and the overall atmosphere of the surroundings.

One thing I have always found unfortunate about entry-level acting is how fatiguing it can be to listen to players' inaccurate delivery and voice inflection. I find it very distracting when emphasis is placed on the wrong word in a statement, when an accent is forced or out-of-tone, or when inflection is high when it should be low or low when it should be high.

I dealt with no such distraction on this night, and I have to applaud every actor in the show (young, old, male and female) for their spot-on delivery.

And as far as the lead players go, I can't say enough about what a pleasure it was to watch each of them work.

Michael Morgart, as Capt. Arthur Keller, masterfully captured his character's mixed feelings of hope and despair, all the while portraying a “man's man” at the heart of a difficult situation.

As Arthur's wife, Kate, Kelly Riefer waded through the roller-coaster of moments as finely and gracefully as a true southern belle would, and Austin Jones was ideal as their son, James Keller, and at times made me forget he wasn't actually a young man from a well-to-do southern family who disagreed with many of his father's old fashioned ways.

And the two main women? Wow, you're talking great chemistry and top-notch presentation.

Basically, Anna Nisbett, as Helen, and Ellie Hall, as Annie, took acting about as far out of the equation as possible for a two-hour stretch, and in its place inserted a stark, intense realism that spurred a long, unavoidable series of feelings.

Even without using words, Nisbett brought forth huge emotion and sensitivity. Meanwhile, Hall used perfect pitch in her wording, creating numerous wholly believable moments, ranging from the frustrating to the joyous.

The pair worked together as if in complete accord, and even broke a wooden chair for real (obviously not rehearsed) during one of their many physical struggles (a.k.a. "fight scenes).

And if you know the story, you know about the scene toward the end where Helen hands a key to Annie. It was awesome; you could have heard a pin drop in the building and tears were quietly flowing all over the place (including from the eyes of the two women in our party).

Steve and I looked at each other in one of those "oh my" moments and agreed afterward that we were pretty much choked up, too.

Not that I'm an experienced Broadway critic, but I know this production was special, from its nuts-and-bolts technical aspects to its actors' beautiful harmony and heart-felt effort.

Apparently, the Fine Linen folks share the Cedar Street Playhouse with another group, Ozark Actors Theatre. Calendars for both are easily found online.

Next up for Fine Linen is "Seussical the Musical" in April. Lanin Thomasma, a friendly, distinguished-looking man who played Dr. Anagnos in *The Miracle Worker*, told me after the show that the Dr. Seuss-based production promises to have a plenty of color, pizzazz and flash.

I'm guessing it could be worth a return trip to Rolla's remarkable gathering place for live entertainment.