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Stage Reviews

'The Voice of the Prairie'

*Back Alley Theatre
Through May 14*

By ED KAUFMAN

John Olive's "The Voice of the Prairie," now at the Back Alley Theatre, is a rare gem of a show, one that is touching and tender. It's also full of the awe and mystery of an early America that still had a sense of innocence and wonder about things.

We've lost our collective imaginations to a world view that seems more self-absorbed than anything else. Our legacy is a blend of science and realism that has rendered everything much too literal. With "The Voice of the Prairie," much like the voice of Garrison Keillor and the many other storytellers (including Mark Twain and Will Rogers) who have enriched our lives, our imaginations are touched by its uncanny ability to make the spoken word something deft and delicious.

That power is captured with a narrative structure that goes back and forth between 1895 and 1923, when radio had its own mesmerizing effect on the American listening public. "The Voice of the Prairie" is also something of a fairy tale and, as such, we don't have to worry about time and place. Don Gruber's set design (a line of picket fencing), the effective lighting design of Lawrence Oberman and the sound design and the costumes of Bob Miller all combine to make the production an experience in magic.

Still, there is a story, as Dick O'Neill, the perennial Irish storyteller, sets the stage with a couple of Irish tall tales. Soon we're into the story of the adventures of his young son Davey (Bobby Zamoski) and the blind girl Frankie (Adrienne Hampton), a couple of runaway kids

echoing the adventures of Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn on the Mississippi. As they ride the rails, they're intoxicated by their sense of freedom. Soon they are parted, but memories linger.

We skip to 1923, when Davey is now David (Ronny Cox), a roaming farmhand from the Midwest who tells stories about his youthful adventures with blind Frankie. He's spotted by Leon (Barry Gordon), a smooth-talking New York operator who is in the newfangled business of selling radios and radio time. He also refuses to get an FCC license for broadcasting.

Soon the young Frankie -- by now the self-assured and self-sufficient school teacher Francis (Gretchen Corbett) -- comes back into the life of Davey/David. He wants to go back in time; only "real things" have changed. Still, "The Voice of the Prairie" is also a fairy tale, and fairy tales do have a way of working out.

Bob Clark's sensitive direction keeps all the various pieces together, while the entire cast, including John M. Jackson in an assortment of roles, is absolutely wonderful. Playwright Olive's words and images are mesmerizing -- he is a true yarn-spinner in the best tradition.