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STAGE REVIEW

'Voice': It's Still Loud and Clear

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Some plays just get to you. John Olive's "The Voice of the Prairie" is one of them. It was a gem when it played the Old Globe in 1987. It's a gem now at the Back Alley Theatre where it opened Sunday.

Understand: This is a fairy tale about the early days of radio, about the power of language and about humankind's infinite capacity to imagine. It is interwoven with the Tom Sawyerish adventures of two runaway kids, an orphaned boy and a blind girl, who "ride the freights" across America, intoxicated with their penniless freedom and the giddiness brought on by hunger.

This is love at its merriest and its least contrived. Davey (Bobby Zamoroski) and Frankie (Rachel Babcock) meet accidentally and are accidentally parted. But don't worry. This is a fairy tale. It has a happy ending.

And a deft, delicious middle. The boy grows into a man, roaming the prairie as a farmhand and telling stories. David (Ronny Cox plays the grown-up Davey) is spotted by Leon Schwab (Barry Gordon), a smooth operator out of New York City who has glommed on to a new marketing idea: programming and peddling a newfangled invention called a radio. What does radio need? A good storyteller. Leon hires David.

It's the start of a Garrison Keillorish career that takes more than a few captivating turns. But playwright Olive's achievement is not in plot alone (though he's no mean tale-spinner himself). It's in the passion he injects in his characters, the web of joyous language he puts in their mouths and the sheer effervescence of their words. By outwardly pursuing the birth of radio, Olive inwardly signals the danger of literacy dying.

Images, which are too literal, cannot replace the latitude of language. They cannot cast spells or, like David Quinn, keep memory alive by turning it into myth. When language leaves us (and too much has slipped away already), we draw the curtain on the best part of our minds.

So Olive's medium is his message, but it's framed in such a spirited metaphor that we're swept away by a rogues' gallery of characters we love to meet. They range not only from the bounding young Frankie and Davey to the grown-up Frances and David or the hand-wringing Leon Schwab, but all the way to such peripheral (and meticulous) creations as James, the asthmatic minister hopelessly in love with Frances, or Davey's father Poppy, as true a yarn-spinning Irishman as ever there was.

Bob Clark directed this seven-actor version of the play at the Back Alley with plenty of zest. (The San Diego Old Globe had done a three-actor version that worked equally well; Olive is nothing if not accommodating.) Its movement is lateral on a set by Don Gruber consisting of a wall-to-wall fence aided by a few pieces of furniture when the action moves indoors. Bob Miller's costumes are on the mark. A great deal of mood-setting is achieved here by Lawrence Oberman's lighting and, especially, Jerry Sider's sound score. Sound in this play is language. It's no accident that Frankie's blind.

Babcock is an ebullient Frankie, fresh and outspoken, quite overwhelming Zamorski's Davey, who (as written) is a good deal less sure of himself. It's the symbiosis that works for those two. Gordon's Schwab is the clown of the piece, a displaced Brooklynite who'll never get used to fresh air and a born deal-maker who endures physical pain when parting with his money. Dick O'Neill (especially vivid as Davey's father, Poppy) and John M. Jackson provide clear and differentiated portrayals in a variety of smaller roles.

As the adult Frances, now a schoolteacher, Gretchen Corbett has the class and elegance one might expect of the wise, impulsive child that she once was. Younger and older, Frankie/Frances is such a magnetic character, that it's no trick to understand why the adult David is obsessed with her. After a start that borders on the fussy, Cox as David rights himself to become the prototypical bashful, lonesome cowboy, always a little surprised at his successes—an utterly swell, seductive fellow. This a James Stewart role *par excellence*.

And, for that matter, this is a Frank Capra play—in tone, not in derivation. Olive owns it exclusively. It may not be much more than a deft and witty valentine to a pioneering spirit and to the value of words, but that suffices. It's fun, it has a knowing heart and a voice to delight all within earshot.