

# Pawtucket's Seussical Has Heart, But Lacks Focus



I went into this production of *Seussical* having never seen the show before. Like anyone, I know the classic Dr. Seuss lore, have a deep attachment to the characters and can see why the show is so popular among local theaters with its bright colors, fun musical numbers and stories suitable for children, but subtly tackling real issues for adults (Mayzie LaBird actually abandons her child for a life of partying). Musicals are always a bear to produce and they take a lot of moving parts working together to look seamless. The casting of this production offered up some real talent with several standouts, but it felt a bit like too much was resting on their talents alone without much guidance to get everyone working together. This is not to say there wasn't chemistry among cast members, as there often was, but rather that it felt as though each actor was working in a show without enough cohesion to tie it all up.

The set, designed by C. Richard Koster and Brian Mulvey, offered great levels and on-point Seussian scenery. Somewhat less successful were costumes that were well-thought-out but felt one size too big on almost every actor and wigs so distracting I often found myself just watching the hair. Directors often tell actors to "get the hair out of their eyes," so it was surprising to see fake hair placed purposefully in the faces needing to be seen.

I was most impressed by the beautiful "Notice Me, Horton," a duet with Ryan Livingston as Horton the Elephant and Dalita Getzoyan as Gertrude McFuzz. They were locked in on each other even when the song leads them apart in the story. It felt like true collaborative work as a culmination after each of their solo numbers were beautifully performed.

Livingston's consistent stage presence and tension as the sweet but anxious Horton was transporting. His voice is like a warm hug in its effortlessness. He was the strong backbone of the production due to his ever-interesting facial expressions and in-character body movements creating fun visuals even when he wasn't the focus of a scene.

Getzoyan has a true understanding of how to draw an audience in. When she smiles or when she is sad, she knows how to express it so that the crowd is with her on the ride. She exudes confidence and has the kind of singing voice that you watch with anticipation because you know she is going to flawlessly hit every big note. For a lovely petite little bird, her energy fills up the whole auditorium with her Gertrude and only a one-feather tail (which incidentally had two feathers, driving my OCD mad).

Andrew Bobola is listed as both director and choreographer, two jobs that individually would be enormous undertakings for anyone with a musical production. It is important to have these roles separated so that the checks and balances of a director's vision and a choreographer's talent combine to create smooth dance numbers. A lot of the dance numbers showed clear skill by the cast, but an unorganized mishmash of movement when put all together.

Most notably in the dance ensemble were two of the Citizens of Who, Kimberly Spera and Samantha Weiman, who shone every time they were on stage. There were several occasions where they were relegated to the back and I wished they had been given more to do center stage with their bright smiles and clear dance ability.

Some of the liveliest moments of the show came in the form of some of the smaller roles such as Christopher Margodonna as General Genghis Kahn Schmitz and Tylar Ibrahima as the Mayor of Whoville. Seeing their impeccable comedic timing and bold choices amidst what felt a little like slapdash comedy left me wanting more from the rest of the cast as a whole. Bright colors, big songs and fantastical characters should leave the audience smiling, but when some members of the cast lost focus or dropped a smile when they were not in the spotlight, the bigger picture felt unfinished.

Joseph Carvalho led the band with ease and expertise. The music was clear and energetic and always kept aware of the actors it was scoring. Unfortunately, in the auditorium, they were placed in front of the stage, which isn't always a fixable problem, but this puts a lot of pressure on every actor's microphone. I noticed several key characters did not wear microphones and their performances were drowned out by the music playing between them and the audience.

The messages from Dr. Seuss are those of heart, community and love. When producing a show of this magnitude it is important to keep those sentiments at the forefront. Theater, and especially musicals, with their endless moving parts, can be a tense process, but it remains important to take a moment

before the first light comes up to remember to smile for the audience through whatever is happening behind the scenes. It never matters what chaos happens backstage, if you dance through it and beam for the crowd, they only remember how good they felt when they watched it. This show found those moments and showed some real ability, but lost the overall focus and message.

*Pawtucket Community Players presents Seussical The Musical, running through Nov 24 at Jenks Auditorium, 350 Division St, Pawtucket (across from McCoy Stadium). Performances are Fridays and Saturdays at 7:30pm and Sundays at 2pm. Purchase e-tickets online and print at home to avoid the line - <https://app.arts-people.com/index.php?actions=4&p=1> or call 401.726.6860 to reserve.*