

A Review of “Robin Hood and Maid Marian, a Family Friendly Romantic Drama.”

Continuing at the Boone Community Theatre.

By John Pea

### Cerebral Lord Robin Meets His Match

I attended the Boone Community Theatre’s production of “Robin Hood and Maid Marian” last Thursday evening. Because the play was written by local playwright Jonathan Levi, and directed by the same, I thought this would be a wonderful opportunity to see local performers bringing a never-seen, new production to vivid and enjoyable life: I was not disappointed.

The performers did indeed bring the story of Robin Hood and Maid Marian to life: we were swept up in this classic tale: the hero has been treated unjustly, so publicly humiliated that his love for Marian seems doomed from the start. But isn’t Robin Hood just reflective of a chivalrous, medieval morality tale, a beloved story perfect for the playing on the bard, Alan-a-dale’s lute? Isn’t the formula still with us: boy meets girl; boy loses girl; boy gets girl in the end? Well, yes, but this is what we *expect* when we already *know* the story right?

We come to stories like this to *see* the good ones win over the evil ones.

We come to these stories for the *comfort of the expected*.

And yet, over and over again, Levi, writer and director, takes us to unexpected places: this is NOT your expected Robin Hood, and Marian is not your expected potential lady: our comfortable story becomes unexpectedly rich and savory with unexpected seasonings. And it takes the whole cast and company to do it.

But it begins with Lord Robin, a Robin Hood I have never seen before! Levi emphasizes the fact that Robin is a Lord throughout the whole play. It is almost shocking to find out how much we *like* and trust this Robin Hood. We cannot dismiss him as a love-blind, passionate heart-filled man who is so out of his mind with passion that he can express himself only in sword-play and violence. Brandon Windus refuses such simple choices: this is a complex Robin, who, like the Lord he is, must always consider more than himself. Windus commands a countenance and subtle voice that exudes peace, gentleness, courtliness, and (surprise, surprise) an endearing patience for his fellow human beings. And Levi’s direction encourages the audience to join Robin in observing all his beloveds from the sideline, musing with Robin about the foibles, joys, disappointments, and

wonderments of the human condition. Nothing rushes this Lord Robin: nothing causes Robin to forget that he is a Lord who is in charge of all his lordly virtues. Unlike his swashbuckling predecessors, this Robin is a man of compassion, thought, and deliberation, so surprising in an audience age when knee-jerk reactions and instant judgments are valorized. Lord Robin offers alternative ways of being Robin Hood. Windus and Levi have spun a tale of cautionary and proprietary love. We can see that Robin loves Maid Marian from the start, but he also loves his mates, his bullied and battered people, and perhaps fairness most of all. But Windus, in his thoughtful manner and style, refuses to be “bullied” or “battered” beyond his courtly and generous self. We have never seen this Lord Robin before. He commands the first act. And like all commanders, Windus, seizes our attention and won’t let us go: we as the audience are invited to “see” the world through Robin’s generous eyes. Kudos to Windus (and Levi) for his intelligent, suggestive, timeless, and provocative creation of a refreshingly new Robin Hood.

But Levi has written himself into a problem: such a strong, generous, and cerebral Robin needs a lady that meets his match, and Maid Marian, who ultimately becomes his match, is strongly and intelligently played by Lily Joseph. Joseph could have played Maid Marian as one of those milk-toast, near lifeless medieval maidens who faint at the sight of their own shadow, but this knife-wielding, ready-to-wrestle-and-immobilize damsel, is as strong, generous, and compassionate a person as Lord Robin is himself, and she is also just as vulnerable and thoughtful. And note, she has to have all the qualities of a lady as well, which she does exhibit, but not at the risk of downplaying the character’s real depth of heart and strength of mind. Thanks to Levi and Joseph, Maid Marian is the character that transforms the most from the beginning of the play until the end. Maid Marian in the first act shows a little of what we will see later, but she comes to shine in the second act: in fact, arguably, if the first act is owned by Lord Robin, the second act is owned by Maid Marian until the very end when both characters shine together.

And while Windus and Joseph have used their abilities to co-create a joyful and delightful relational journey of mutual discovery, their relationship would have no depth without the characters and cast that support them in co-creating and challenging that fabled and storied world.

So many characters stand out: Little John played by Christopher Levi almost supplants the physical world of Robin’s mental journey. Little John is the one to carry the passion and physical expression of the real dangers in Lord Robin’s world. Thanks to Levi’s Little John, we never forget that the Sheriff’s threat is a

real one, that real human lives are being hurt, and Little John, thanks to Levi, always bears the countenance and ready staff of one who loves with his actions. Perhaps this is the actor's and director's tip of the hat to the former Robin Hood traditions. Both Levis still celebrate the joy of fighting for the good cause and protecting the innocent.

There's a great deal to say about Tim Hunter's wonderful performance of Sir Guy, that character that *already* has so many strikes against him just because he is wooing the hero's gal. As audience members, we want to listen to his pragmatic, and well-thought out advice to Marian, but the urge to boo, hiss, is a strong one, almost like "this man wants to have an 'affair' with Robin's woman!" As audience members of course, we are always on Marian's side. But I want to note a specific moment of great acting and direction: when Marian finds out her father has died, Sir Guy does the worst thing possible: he tries to sooth Marian's intense grief by renewing one more time his offer to marry her (it's all about him!). As an audience member, I was incensed, what a jerk! But then Hunter (and the director/playwright) creates this beautiful picture moment, where this stuffy, unbendable character, comes down and gently touches Marian—one real human being sharing another's pain—it's the first time that we ponder—maybe he *does* care for her on some level. Brilliant moment, Sir Guy is not all he would seem. Darn it! Thank you Levi and Hunter for finding the levels in a hard-to-like character!

And speaking of engaging and memorable picture moments—and I can never tell if this is director, writer, or actor based—so I will give credit to all, I want to name two other standout scenes that will remain with me because they are so powerful. Both scenes occur in the context mentioned above: Marian's grief over her father's death. Caisha Johnson shines as Win Scarlet—she is excellent throughout the play—but this moment, when she is comforting Marian, is a highlight of the entire play. We have already become familiar with Win as another-swashbuckler-reminder character, but in this moment, Win becomes the heartbroken friend and confidant: she bleeds for her friend. Is this why Sir Guy seems so shallow at first, because we see such real supportive grief here? And of course, the scene would unravel if not for Joseph's standout performance as well: we grieve to see her grieve, and Win invites us in, saying, it's okay, we can be there for Marian too.

Another stand-out scene for me is when Marian grieves with her mother, strongly and deftly played by Jessica Stanley. The scene is a heart-wrencher, which is aided by one of the most beautiful stage portraits I have ever seen: Marian leaning into her mother's knee, both clinging to one another—two broken people finding

hope and strength in each other. The genuine actions and dialogue make this one of the most powerful and poetic scenes in the play, indeed, unforgettable.

And it is after these three—transformative scenes—added to the compelling scene where both mother and daughter debate Marian’s priorities and choices, Lady Mable (Marian’s mother) indicating her support for Lord Robin—it is the combination of all these scenes where we intensely follow Marian’s powerful journey into adulthood—it is in these scenes that we see her grow into a challenging, supportive, intelligent, compassionate and passionate, truly fitting match for Lord Robin. Lady Marian will be very much his equal and partner in all things. And thus the ending is longed for and deeply appreciated. Am I spoiling the show by saying Robin and Marian get together, and we are so very glad?

Although, as an audience member, at least from where I was sitting, that final scene when they do get together—Robin and Marian—was very frustrating. It should have been an enchanting scene—Robin recognizing for the very first time that Maid Marian has chosen to join him in the woods. It should have been great: what do the audience members want to see at such a time: Marian’s and Robin’s faces, lighting up in mutual recognition! And what do we see? Robin’s back to the audience: not his face. I was so disappointed. I missed that key moment of recognition. Sad.

So many other fantastic performances that graced the play with different needed energies:

- Every time Zacc Cue comes on the stage as Alan-a-dale, his character’s energy, fun, his heart-filled love of enjoyment and song reminds us that love wins in the end. But is there also a subtle clue here that Alan-a-dale is telling the audience that the art of singing, music, tale-telling, dramatic art itself, that all of it, all of this—the entire show is finally a celebration—indeed nothing can stand before Cue’s aesthetic charisma, his gathering in all the artful co-creations around. I almost expected Alan-a-dale to wink at the audience as if to say, you see I am an artistic creation too!
- David Michael, especially as Sir Richard of the Lea, almost steals the show with his intense performance of his grief concerning all of his family’s losses. I am grateful that Joseph carries the day with her grief too. But then again, is the playwright weaving a thread of grief, that all these well-meaning persons long in their grief to live untroubled lives? Are their griefs also the result of seeing their beloved land come to unjust ruin by cruel leadership?

- I have already written way too much. Who is going to want to read all of this? The rest of the players are to be commended for such spot-on and necessary performances. John Hoffman as the Sheriff is necessarily a static character, but I thoroughly enjoyed the humor and practical whimsicality he brought to the role. As opposed to Sir Guy, who seemed to only care about himself, with a troubled tinge of conscience, Hoffman's Sheriff only cares about himself with sheer delight! All the other characters helped to co-create a fabled world into a new creation where Robin and Marian can walk, breathe, and come to life! I give special commendations to Embry Richardson, Kaylin Johnson, Garry Gardner, Gavin Siler, and Michaela Skinner.
- One of the greatest compliments an audience member can give to the crew concerning the performance is the total invisibility of the sound, lights, and scene changes. When we are caught up in the story, we sometimes forget the incredible amount of work done by those "behind the scenes." My wife Kim and I marveled over the "forest" as we came in, and promptly—when the lights faded and came up again—let all those beautiful, hard-crafted trees become Sherwood, omnipresent but transformed. Logs become staff and sword battle-grounds; bows shoot imaginary but "real-for-us" arrows: we see them fly, and (brilliant sound design) we "see" and hear them hit the trees. What a fun moment when the arrows travel longer, and we stretch to hear the "thunk," only to have one "miss" as we wait forever with smiles on our faces. Alas the lighting was so unintrusive that I did not pay attention, although I know there were cool "forest" colors and moments.

Finally, my hats off to Jonathan Levi, the writer and director who invited us into this new creative world, a more cerebral world, where Robin Hood deliberates upon his thoughts, feels for his friends, and enacts a courtly world where the primary lordly values—justice, love, intelligence, and compassion—refuse to yield their ground to lesser status. And a Marian who will never settle for less than her best self too.

Kudos to all!

And unless I have been too wordy and have not said it aloud—you should see this show if you have the chance!