



When it's not straining for relevance, 'The Will Rogers Follies' succeeds as pure entertainment

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Will Rogers, who entertained the nation in the 1920s and '30s with his wit, wisdom, warmth and rope tricks, was thoroughly a man of his times.

Maybe that's why, for all of its pleasantries and many enjoyable moments, "The Will Rogers Follies" -- the musical
..... for the third time in two decades under
..... -- feels completely out of sync with the Days
of Rage that are 2016. Rogers' gentle and folksy humor, if often political and occasionally pointed, feels positively quaint in the midst of today's hyper-partisan vitriol. Despite the show's attempt to bring his observations into the present by having him do things like reading current headlines from the New York Times, hearing the word "Trump" come out of Rogers' mouth is jarring.

Even so, Jason Aycock's effortless charm is great casting for Rogers. His voice is faultless and endlessly pleasant -- when he sings the musical's only really hummable number, "Never Met a Man I Didn't Like," it's easy to see how John Denver was Broadway's first casting choice for the role -- and his projection of an Everyman's sense decency carries the day even when his rope tricks don't always go as planned.

He shows a flash (and *just* a flash) of anger only once, when decrying the Wall Street types who brought on the Great Depression, which is pretty much the only moment that the show feels vital to our angry times still in recovery from the Great Recession.

When the show's not straining for relevance, however, it's fun to watch, with an effervescent sense of entertainment that comes from the brilliant concept of wrapping Rogers' compelling story inside a Zeigfeld Follies production, complete with the showgirls and requisite production numbers, many of them ordered by the overbearing voice of showman Florenz Ziegfeld (Jeff Phillips) booming in from offstage. (Somehow, Ziegfeld's not-that-scantily-clad showgirls come across as downright wholesome, even for all their tarty oohs and ahs.)

Director Chisholm excels at staging the big song and dance numbers that buoy the show when Rogers' impressive but familiar story, which takes him from the plains of Oklahoma to the stages of vaudeville and the screens of Hollywood, lags. The "Power Puff Ballet," with its Rockette-style high kicks, is a thing of beauty, but it pales in comparison to the precision, percussive clapping and hat-tapping in "Our Favorite Son," an absolute marvel of choreography.

These numbers are given a lift by Debbie Scheu's intentionally cheesy costumes -- opening number "Will-A-Mania" has the Follies Girls bedecked in cow-spotted tights, with four Wranglers wearing cartoony cowboy get-ups -- which are as close as you can get to expressing a sense of humor with clothes.

As Will's disapproving father, Clem -- one of Rogers' many quotable gems is, "Once a man becomes a father, it's like he forgets everything he knew about being a son" -- Richard Bunting keeps things light and jokey; his song "It's a Boy," with Will's Six Single Sisters, is a highlight. It's a good choice for a show that avoids downers at all costs, even when talking about the death of Will's young son, Freddy (played by the adorable Cardier-Princeton Borrromeo), who's invited back to join the family for the show.

Shannon Playl is Rogers' long-suffering, saintly wife Betty Blake Rogers, and she sings beautifully on both jaunty ballad "My Big Mistake" and torch song "No Man Left For Me," which brought the house down. Serving as a go-between from Will's story to the big production numbers, a smiling Tammy Sue Daniels cuts a striking figure as Ziegfeld's Favorite performer.

The show builds toward Rogers' doomed 1935 plane trip with Wiley Post, who's played with a delightful smarm by Marlon Ramos, wearing a designer eyepatch that's as alarming as it is funny. (The last person you want to fly with is probably a smiling pilot wearing an eyepatch.)

Just like everything else in the show, however, even Rogers' death never feels dark. It's a tone that fits the man's sunny personality, and another reason why "The Will Rogers Follies" both feels like a show from another time and is the perfect escape from our own.

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