



Staff Photo/ John Croft

Miss Clavel (Katherine Ferrand), left, and Madeline (Libby Winters) are the principal characters in "Madeline's Rescue."

'Madeline' loses charm in move from page to stage

By Peter Vaughan/Staff Writer

The plot of Ludwig Bemelmans' "Madeline's Rescue," adapted for the stage at the Children's Theatre Company, is about as slim as they get.

It's a variation on the classic Boy Meets Girl story, only it goes: Girl Meets Dog, Girl Loses Dog, Girl Gets Dog. In printed form, it's all over in 50 pages, most of which are filled with delightful drawings of little girls, Parisian streets and Parisian characters. It's scant, though charming, stuff from which to fashion an 80-minute play, as its adapters have demonstrated at the Children's Theatre.

Playwright Constance Congdon and composer Mel Marvin have transformed "Madeline's Rescue" into a musical that retains some of the book's abundant charms but obliterates others in its attempt to be something other than what Bemelmans intended.

The story is little more than a sketch. Madeline falls into the Seine and is rescued by a stray dog named Genevieve. Madeline, her 11 schoolmates and the

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redoubtable Miss Clavel take the dog in. However, the trustees visit and toss it out. The girls unsuccessfully search Paris for their friend. The dog returns and is welcomed back, and soon deposits a litter large enough to provide each girl with a puppy. End of book.

Congdon has stretched the plot this way and that, inserting a bright geography lesson, enlarging the search through the streets of Paris and considerably magnifying the presence and importance of Lord Cucuface and his fellow board members.

In this latter endeavor, she severely tests the simplicity and directness of the book when introducing a moral lesson about the nature of heroism. While the interpolation provides valuable padding to the play, it also transforms a simple story from which each reader is free to find his or her own significance into a clumsily underlined moralizing from Congdon's psyche.

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Dear Mr. Vaughan,

I would like to ask you to do a very heroic thing. Look, as a critic, at your review of "Madeline's Rescue."

What were you really expecting? What are you asking for? When you wrote your previous article about the upcoming season at CTC, you reported the contrast between "Oliver" which had to be cut down and "Madeline" which needed to be beefed up. You even knew about the enlargement on the theme of heroism.

Yet when you see the finished product, if your comments are to be taken literally, you imply that the play should have consisted of: 1) verbatim French translation of Bemelman's English text, 2) done in front of sets that faithfully reproduce every page in the book. Do you think there is an audience that would have sat still for that? You would have been among the first to demand a refund, if you are honest with yourself.

I am surprised that you did not complain about the liberties taken with the colors of the pages that are yellow in the book. How about the ethnic makeup of the student body? (But of course you do fear the disapproval of your peers.) Yet you do not even like a child singing to her dog to use the words of a child.

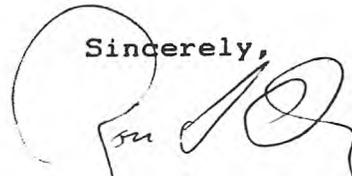
As for "clumsily underlined moralizing," do you disagree with any part of it? If so, please explain.

I realize that it is the watchword of our society that we do not "impose our morality" on others. That common idea, however, does not hold water. For there are realities in the area of morality. Many are commonly agreed upon. Some are even incorporated into law. For others, we know them to be true but only acknowledge it when the idea gets in under our guard, as it is when conveyed by art and literature. This is indeed and has always been one of the purposes of art.

Take a deep breath and repeat after me, "I was wr wr wr wr WRONG!!" (We will do our best to catch anyone who faints.)

Then, to prove that you have a heart, retract the conclusion of your "review." Let the Star Tribune print a true impression of the joy that was conveyed to the hundreds of kids and adults in the audiences. After all, would you really rather have kids go watch Dick Tracy machine-gunning thugs?

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Rsu' followed by a stylized flourish.

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