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Making a Merry Little Christmas in St. Louis

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The Taylor Performing Arts Center has just completed its fourth community show, a version of the classic movie musical *Meet Me in St. Louis*. (Louis? Looie? You won't be any more certain after the show than before.)



The Taylor shows have followed an interesting progression. All of them have been staged versions of movie musicals; all of those musicals, in turn, were classic slices of Americana period pieces. *Meet Me in St. Louis*, set in Missouri in 1905, follows that pattern perfectly. It also showcases to great effect the increasingly sophisticated stagecraft the Taylor crew are bringing to bear, adding up to a very enjoyable evening for fans of classic musicals.

The show is sort of an Americanized version of a Jane Austen novel, centered around a prominent St. Louis family and their two eldest (unmarried) daughters. Each of these women have their eyes and hearts set on a certain beau, and with the sensibility of the era, both must find ways to manipulate the

situation to maneuver meetings, dates, and ultimately proposals.

The show mostly takes place in and around the family home, and it is here that the brilliance of the set design comes into play. The set is, for all intents and purposes, a doll's house – the curtain opens on youngest daughter Tootie (played with depth and gusto by Samantha Rily) playing on the front porch, and soon opens to reveal the entire downstairs of a well-to-do family home. The set is so fully realized that when the script calls for exterior action beside the house, actors “inside” the home keep adjusting curtains, turning lights on and off, and going about the business of living a life, a truly impressive touch of staging. The scale of the set is also something that must be seen to be believed, as it's large enough to hold nearly the entire cast in waiting.



The stagecraft is by no means the only thing that has gotten better as time has gone on with this company. The original motion picture, released in 1944, is widely held to be the greatest movie musical produced by Hollywood, and served as the platform to launch some of Judy Garland's signature performances. Marjory Zuk, a Taylor veteran last seen in last year's *White Christmas*, handles this role with grace and aplomb. The high point of the show is her solo performance of the trademark song *Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas* – and if you've never heard the song in context, it's somewhat astonishing to discover what it meant in its original inception.



Zuk is backed up by a few other returning Taylor vets, notably Elisabeth Hunter (Rose Smith) and Jeffrey Loewen (Alonso Smith), both fresh off triumphal performances in a few months ago in *The Wizard of Oz*. Loewen particularly is given a chance to shine in a duet with Tamara Ashton (Anna Smith), showing off an impressive set of pipes he didn't get the chance to exercise earlier this year.

All in all, artistic director Patrick Garcia has quite a bit to be proud of. His vision is continually pushing this community theater to new and better things. Here's to looking forward to what the future holds!

The Taylor Performing Arts Center is located at 845 West Colorado Blvd., Monrovia, CA 91016. For more information, please go to <http://www.1ktaylorperformingarts.com/>

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