

## **'Tell Me' is a touching mix of humor and pain**

By Dorothy Velasco

For The Register-Guard

By the time the new musical "Tell Me" receives its next production it will have a new name. The authors aren't quite satisfied with the title (formerly "The Chocolate Tree"), but there's much in the musical to please them and their audiences.

The production at Actors Cabaret brought the author, composer and a director from New York to develop their show about as far off Broadway as you can get without leaving the country. By all accounts the experience has been fruitful.

A.D. Penedo wrote the lyrics and book, while Marshall Paillet, a senior at Yale, composed the music and co-authored the book. Busy director Igor Goldin came out for an extended rehearsal period.

You can thank Actors Cabaret producers Jim Roberts and Joe Zingo, along with talented young performer Ashley Apelzin, for attending readings of new musicals at the National Alliance for Musical Theatre in New York and discovering this tender, intimate show. It's a perfect fit for the excellent cast at ACE.

Apelzin landed the bonanza role of Jessie, a rambunctious, imaginative young girl who is stricken with cancer. Although Jessie is only 10, Apelzin, a slight 17-year-old, convinces us she is almost that young.

Jessie lives with her warmly comprehensive mother Carolyn, her loving but undemonstrative father Frank, older brother Michael, who is angry and disturbed by her illness, and adoring younger brother James.

She deals with her progressively worsening illness with such charming optimism and such a positive response that she brings Anne Frank to mind. You can't help but think they would have changed the world had they lived to adulthood.

Jessie thrives in the realm of her imagination, taking fantasy trips to the Amazon or Paris. She loves chocolate, and one day she plants an imaginary seed for a chocolate tree, which produces chocolate hearts. She begins to sell the imaginary hearts to raise money to help sick children, and soon friends, neighbors and far-away strangers start selling real chocolates to provide funds for her foundation.

She's one of those brilliant children whose innocence doesn't allow them to believe that something can't be done, and so they do it.

"Tell Me" is neither a fluff-ball musical nor a heavy drama. It's something in-between, something natural and true. The songs flow easily out of the dialogue without a big buildup. As in real life there is plenty of humor mixed with the sadness.

The emotional tensions and family dynamics are all believable. Erica Jean is the kind of mother everyone should have, bravely bolstering her daughter every way she can.

Caleb Hartsfield as younger brother James gives a sweet, moving performance. Ben Klute as older brother Michael is a bundle of confused emotions, and Tony Joyner is sympathetic as the father, a man who has repressed his emotions so long he doesn't have a clue about how to help his daughter.

Alex Mentzel is intriguing as a serious young boy who comes to learn about Jessie at the beginning of the show. The supporting cast is delightful. Amanda Fackrell, Laura Holden, Rebecca Teran, Colin Gray, Greg Mathans and Mark Van Beever are ACE regulars who hit their marks with style.

Some of the songs are beautiful, making good use of counterpoint for four or five singers. Jessie's ballad, "Tell Me," is the most enchanting number, letting us really see into her mind. "I Don't Know" does the same for Frank, who can't understand how fun can come out of pain.

Thanks to the thoughtful direction, the songs are performed naturally, not in a forced, look-at-me-I'm-on-Broadway style, which wouldn't have been appropriate. All of the voices are lovely, the kids holding their own with the adults.

Some of the important songs could be developed even a little more, and it might be possible to drop one or two of the less interesting ones. And, I would get rid of the mincing steps of an Asian woman in a fantasy scene. Someone as young as Jessie wouldn't imagine that outdated cliché.

Parts of the show could use more tension and suspense. It meanders along a bit casually at times but the authors will undoubtedly sharpen it, just as they will discover the perfect title.

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Dorothy Velasco, a Springfield playwright, reviews theater for The Register-Guard.