

OKLAHOMAN & TIMES
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‘Appleseed’ Succeeds as Well-Acted, Consistent Musical

“Appleseed” is a touching, enjoyable piece of light Americana. It is an enthusiastic, lively musical, with book by Todd Van Every, lyrics by William A. Davidson and music by Irwin Webb. The show is based on the play “Johnny Appleseed” by E.P. Conkle.

The three have produced a clever musical with songs ranging from lively spirituals to ballads to rousing works like “The Ohio” and “Great Day in the Morning.” “Appleseed” was particularly good for its upbeat spiritual style. Watch for wordplay like “Duke of Trees -- it’s the only thing that rhymes with Socrates,” or “Don’t let yourself get apple-plectic.”

The confrontation between Johnny Appleseed and Parson Tait is dramatically effective with Johnny singing “Child of God” about God’s love, and Tait and his devotees singing “Let Me Tell You ‘Bout God” -- an artificially pious hymn.

The show is consistent, with uniformly strong performances. David Dobson, as Jonathan Chapman, later nicknamed “Appleseed,” plays the dedicated planter with conviction. He’s paired nicely with Ben Williams, as brother Parley Chapman, for the song “Listen To The Voice,” which ends with a comic dance. Kathy Van Every is convincing as Johnny’s long lost love, Katie, and manages to appear conventional without being stiff. Pat Tweed and David Parker provide comic high points. Tweed’s timing is particularly good. Jennifer Bender and Regina Randall sing the lyrical “Hills of Home” with nicely blended voices.

Period choreography by Billie Thrash is lively and entertaining, particularly during the number, “Great Day in the Morning.”

Staged by Theater ala Carte Productions, this well-performed musical opened Friday and can be seen at 8 p.m. today and Sunday, and 8 p.m. Thursday through Aug. 30 at Carpenter Square Theater. For ticket information, call 232-6500.

-Nancy P. Condit

OKLAHOMA GAZETTE
August 20, 1986

Original play fresh and fun entertainment

Oklahoma City's newest theater group, Theatre ala Carte, made its debut at Carpenter Square Theater with a musical, "Appleseed." The result was *a very fine evening of fun and entertainment.*

The text of the play was written by Oklahoma City advertising man Todd Van Every. It's based on the intriguing legend of Jonathan Chapman, who walked all over the country scattering apple seeds. *The music, by Irwin Webb and William A. Davidson, is excellent.*

Shining in the production is the fine choreography of Billie Thrash. Director Richard Lemin gets the utmost from his cast, representing some of the best local talent available.

The cast is outstanding. David Dobson in the lead role came up with a remarkable performance as the young idealist who sees himself as a "child of God," spreading seeds and goodwill.

Pat Tweed lends her considerable comic talent to the role of Mrs. McNeill, wife of the general who is composing a concerto for fiddle, losing one string at a time. The singing voice of David Parker, as the general, is one of the best in the show.

Kathy Van Every as Katie McNeill sings and acts well, and the very large cast comes up with some exciting production numbers, including "Appleseed," "Great Day In The Morning" and the final camp meeting scene. The chorus singing is unusually good. *Action fills the stage.*

Some of the better songs are "Fresh From Heaven," "Stay," "You Have Brought Me Love," "Child of God" and "Listen To The Voice."

This is a plot with substance, a musical score that is more than adequate, and a company that gives its very best throughout. We need more such productions.

-J. Landis Fleming

FRIDAY
September 5, 1986

‘Appleseed’ an uplifting, family-type production

“Appleseed,” an original musical by Todd Van Every with lyrics by William A. Davidson and music by Irwin Webb, is the warm, family-type story of Jonathan Chapman, better known as Johnny Appleseed. David Dobson brought to his role of Jonathan Chapman all the idealism, enthusiasm for life and commitment necessary to make this part believable and make the play work. David Parker as General McNeill and David Conley as Parson Tait turned in polished performances as well.

“Vocally, the entire cast and ensemble were superior. Three notable numbers were “Child of God” by Dobson, “Listen to the Voice” with Dobson and Ben Williams, and “Hills of Home” by Regina Randall and Jennifer Bender. The show is a polished production with direction by Richard Lemin and choreography by Billie Thrash.

The only flaws in this original production are that occasionally the orchestra drowns out the singing and the play is too long. Some minor strategic cutting would make this show a very enjoyable evening.

“Appleseed,” a production of Theatre ala Carte, is currently playing at Carpenter Square Theatre. ***It is an evening of delightful music and uplifting idealism the entire family would enjoy.***

- Franci Hart

SAN ANTONIO EXPRESS

October 13, 1972

UofT Musical Looks Like Hit

AUSTIN -- The University of Texas Drama Department appears to have come up with an old-fashioned, tuneful musical comedy hit with its premier production of "Fresh From Heaven" (now titled "Appleseed") this week in Hogg Auditorium on the UT campus.

The musical is based on the play, "Johnny Appleseed" by E.P. Conkle, a professor of playwriting at the university. The libretto is by Todd Van Every, an experienced hand with the musical comedy tradition in San Diego and Oklahoma City. Irwin Webb composed the score. Webb is musical director of Oklahoma City's Lyric Theater, and lyrics were written by William A. Davidson, also of Oklahoma City.

The musical is a professional, entertaining mixture of light humor and pathos on the Johnny Appleseed legend. There was a Johnny Appleseed, and in the play he's more than the tin pan-topped rustic who lopes through the Ohio Valley flinging seeds here and there.

Johnny Appleseed was Jonathan Chapman who was born in 1775 in Massachusetts. In 1801, he traveled west with his brother, Parley, in search of his girlfriend, Katie McNeill. Chapman had promised his parents to return to Massachusetts and study for the ministry at Harvard. In the play, Johnny spreads a gentle "we are all God's creations" style Christianity as much as horticulture.

Only when he arrives in the Ohio Valley does he realize his "calling" is to make orchards out of the wilderness. His purpose in the play grows into an obsession, and this compulsion is the cause of misery for his family and Katie. Katie cannot wait for Johnny to finish his ministry and marries the boorish Owen Moor. Parley is unsuited to frontier rigors; his business fails, he takes to whiskey and dies. His parents also die brokenhearted, waiting for Johnny and Parley to return home. ***The pathos growing out of Johnny's endless planting is integrated skillfully with the musical numbers.***

But the reason for the musical, of course, is the music, and the audience is treated to numbers in all styles. There are the sentimental songs, the plaintive lyric,

the frontier square-dance rhythm, some vaudeville, the happy-go-lucky carefree number, jazz and rock and some lovely choruses. In all there are 25 musical numbers.

The cast is too long to compliment individually. However, Mark Harlik, taking the part of Johnny, has the tall, lanky build Johnny might have had, and his baritone is tuneful enough to carry a melody. Other members of the student cast that stood out were Joseph E. Neal, who rendition of the rheumatic, violin-scratching Gen. McNeill provided the comic interludes. Parley was done with proper pathos by Wyn Warren, and there was Kim Kelly, a very pretty redhead with an even prettier voice, who was Katie.

Settings by John Rothgeb were stock realism, but a scrim reproducing a primitive map of the Ohio Territory and a silhouette of Johnny lowered from the flies was a good touch. Gary Gardner's stage direction progressed without any miscues, but Irwin Webb, the conductor, frequently let his partially amplified pit orchestra play too loudly.

I heard several Broadway producers were in the audience, considering whether to take it to the East Coast. If they reacted to "Fresh From Heaven" ("Appleseed") as emphatically as I did, then ***it will not be surprising to see it on Broadway next season.***

- Robert Pincus
Express Music Critic

TEXAN

October 9, 1972

Johnny Plants Trees, Love 'Fresh From Heaven' ('Appleseed') Sows Delight

The irrepressible determination of the legendary Johnny Appleseed himself carries the musical adaptation of his life, the UT drama department's production of "Fresh From Heaven," to success.

In spite of a slow beginning, the story of the American pioneer-preacher is refreshingly told in a two-act play spanning 45 years of his life.

Jonathan Chapman (Mark Harlik) opens his story as a young man moving west to find "his place in the master plan" and his girl Katie (Kim Kelly). Other pioneers making the long, lonely trek west touch Johnny, who tries to make things a bit easier with a little gospel preaching and a few apple saplings.

From the orchard he planted for Katie beside his cabin, Johnny gives saplings to passing settlers to cheer them in the wilderness. Johnny lives there for a while with his brother, Parley (Wyn Warren) and Parley's wife, Suzanne (Jan Holeywell), until the desire to see Katie, the West and to do more preaching and planting send him on farther.

Two years and many saplings later, Johnny finds Katie and her parents (Joseph E. Neal and Ann Armstrong). In a moving duet, Johnny begs Katie to "come with me" as she tries to make him stay. Katie, however, cannot go, and Johnny continues on with his destiny.

After being forced into marriage with a man she doesn't love, Katie sees Johnny many years later. Tortured by the death of his family who "died waiting for me," Johnny nearly gives up his planting. Katie urges him to continue his task.

Musically debating with the dark, bellicose Parson Tait (Steve Schottmiller), Johnny and his "God of Love" win the hearts of the settlers from the jealous parson. Satisfied with his confrontation, Johnny begins to feel his work complete. That same day he hears that Katie is dead.

The frailty brought about by 10 more years of planting finally brings Johnny to rest in the home of Katie's daughter. As he looks restlessly to the west, Johnny dies.

CRITICS CORNER, DANNYSDAY
WKY-TV, Oklahoma City
October 13, 1972

Last Sunday, a large group of Oklahoma Citians traveled to Austin, Texas to see the world premier of a new musical production written by three Oklahoma City men. Todd Van Every, Bill Davidson and Irwin Webb have been working for several years on a show about Johnny Appleseed.

It was a very posh affair complete with a before-the-show buffet and the presentation of keys to the city by Austin's mayor.

"Fresh From Heaven" ("Appleseed") spans a forty-five year period in the life of John Chapman beginning with his departure from Massachusetts for the Ohio Territory and ending with his death still planting trees to bring what he called "a bit of home" to the wilderness.

The role of Johnny requires great versatility from the actor. Progressing from youthful vigor through the deliberateness of the middle years to the halting gait and slower speech of age is difficult, but Mark Harlik handled it with style and conviction. The remainder of the cast performed almost as well. Costume, sets and lighting were good.

There are many good songs ... pleasing to both audience and critic ... notably "Listen to the Voice," which was interrupted several times by applause, "Mindin' My Own Business," and "Child of God." "Child of God" has the potential of being a smash hit as a single in these days of high interest in pop religious music. There are many good songs ... perhaps too many and too many verses of each.

Pace is a problem. After a slow prologue, "Fresh From Heaven" built nicely to the strong ending for the first act. Unfortunately, the second act was spotty. The high point came in the confrontation scene between Parson Tait preaching the hell fire and damnation of a God of hate, and Appleseed preaching the saving grace and mercy of a God of love.

Writing and staging a brand new show is filled with frustration and disappointment. There are flaws that do not show themselves until the actual

production begins and the audience responds. That is one of the reasons most Broadway shows are played first out of town. The authors have already deleted some material and will undoubtedly edit and rewrite as soon as the current run is over.

“Fresh From Heaven” is a gallant effort and has the potential for great success. We salute Todd Van Every, Bill Davidson and Irwin Webb and extend our best wishes to them.

- Joe Jerkins

KTBC-TV, Austin, Texas
October 9, 1972

Tonight was the official opening night of the new musical, "Fresh From Heaven" ("Appleseed") at Hogg Auditorium on the University of Texas campus.

For last night's preview performance, the UT Drama Department hosted a glittering array of ex-students, city and state officials, and a large contingent of Sooners, who came to see the efforts of fellow-Oklahomans, Todd Van Every, Irwin Webb and William Davidson ... as well as to pay homage to UT Playwriting professor, E.P. Conkle, upon whose play, "Johnny Appleseed" the new musical was based.

Known more through myth than through fact, the story of John Chapman, or Johnny Appleseed as he was known, is one of struggle and doubt, of leaving behind everything to fulfill what he believed to be his mission in life: giving pioneers moving west a feeling of ease and a reminder of the homes they left behind by planting apple orchards all through the Ohio Territory.

The world premier performance of "Fresh From Heaven" is as polished as the perfect apple about which Johnny sings. In the role of Johnny, the lean and lanky Mark Harlik shows off an energetic zeal to rival that of the character he so ably portrays. And he also carries off the difficult acting task of aging 45 years on stage, and keeps it completely believable.

The nearly 40-member cast of "Fresh From Heaven" fills the stage with exuberance that spills over the footlights. Gary Gardner's direction is sprightly, and Lathan Sanford's choreography well-patterned.

Something of a mild shock is the modern, rock beat of Irwin Webb's music, which at first seems out of place in this pioneer musical. But once it's established as a convention we accept and like it.

There is a wealth of potential in this new musical, and although some judicious cutting could be employed, Austinites may find someday soon that they have seen a Broadway musical before it got to Broadway.