

GATHERING BLUE

Gary Mitchell, guest reviewer, Daily Reporter

Let me give you my top three reasons for attending Independence Community College/The William Inge Theater for the Arts' production of "Gathering Blue" which opened Thursday morning for students and yesterday evening for the general public, and will be performed tonight and Saturday night at 7:30 and Sunday afternoon at 2:30.

First of all, the basis for this brand-spanking new musical is the famous novel "Gathering Blue" by Lois Lowry. If you aren't familiar with her name, ask almost any young person between fifth grade and the age of 20 and the person will tell you about her, this book, or any number of other very popular, award-winning books by Lowry, such as "The Giver" or "The Messenger." She's very well known by teachers and grade-school students (past and present) alike.

It's a marvelous book because of its powerful message of hope, its strong appeal to the heart, its uniquely imagined world, and its strikingly sympathetic young characters. Even though the book is written for young people, its message is relevant to adults as well. In no way is this a "kiddie" book.

The second recommendation for seeing this production is the fact that the playwright (Richard Hellesten), the composer-lyricists (Michael Silversher and Joy Sikorski), the set and costume designer (Gregory Pulver), the director (Peter Ellenstein) and the local technical director (Ryan Andrus) have worked (and continue to work) so hard on bringing this powerful story to life as a theatrical experience. These six individuals bring a great deal of professional know-how to the project and are audacious enough to make this a project involving seventeen young actors/singers, most of whom are college students at Independence Community College.

The reason anyone goes to see a show is to see strong, believable performances. This cast provides the third very strong reason to see this production. You won't be disappointed in the work of these seventeen cast members. Only one, Joseph Gomez, is a professional actor, brought in recently to fill the role vacated by a student actor who fell too ill to play the part of Jamison. There are several grade-school-aged participants (Hunter Boorigie and Anna Smoll) who will take turns playing the part of Jo, a significant role in the second act of the musical. But the major bulk of the work is provided by very talented college singer-actors.

If you're not familiar with Lois Lowry or the book "Gathering Blue" – here's a quick plot summary. Kira, a young teenager deformed since birth, is left an orphan at the start of the play. Her mother has just died of a mysterious illness; her father reportedly died before she was born in a hunting incident – mauled by beasts of the forest.

Kira (played effortlessly and charmingly by Isabelle Scroggie) finds herself homeless and at odds with unsympathetic townspeople who want her killed because she is deformed and a useless member of society. She is befriended by Matt, a young boy from the “Fen” (the wrong side of the tracks); Jamison (Joseph Gomez), a Guardian who sees that she has the rare gift of weaving and repairing a cloak that holds illustrations of the history of the community); and Thomas (Justin Dupuis), a fellow “artist” and young person like Kira who has the rare gift of being a wood carver.

Kira gradually learns the truth about the death of her parents, the price her artistic gift really costs her, and we learn how her decisions reflect her true gifts as a human being. As a “damaged” human being, Kira was taught by her mother to “take pride in your pain – it makes you stronger.” Kira also learns how leaders in her community try to keep her under their control by using fear as a subtle weapon. As Kira’s awareness grows, so does our understanding of her gifts and her challenges.

Kira, Matt, Jamison, and Thomas carry the major story line and provide vivid characterization, good singing voices, and – especially with the three young characters – a great deal of empathy. The full house Thursday morning was made up of students from various schools and middle schools in the area, all intent on the musical throughout its two-and-a-half hour run. Much of the credit must go to the lead actors who held these young people enthralled. The audience obviously loved Matt, played with high-octane elfin glee by Adam Wulf, and Isabelle Scroggie, as Kira, screaming out their adoration during the curtain calls. Justin Dupuis is solid as the much less colorful Thomas, who provides Kira with emotional support and comradeship.

Other performers in the production also provide outstanding moments. Jerica Hucke as Annabella, the old woman who teaches Kira the art of dyeing the threads, demonstrates strong vocal ability and old-age believability. Her portion of the story, where she teaches Kira about various plants and potions, drags a little since it is inherently less dramatic, but Silversher and Sikorski and provide some of the best music in her scenes.

Additional strong musical numbers are in the scene with the young singer named “Jo” who is being trained to replace the aging singer (Steven Rousey). Jo’s song and the song Rousey provided during the ceremony of the cloak-reading are also beautiful, effective songs.

Act One ends with an almost operatic-trio sung by Scroggie, Dupuis and Gomez. The words weren’t always clear but the musical juxtaposition was thrilling.

Perhaps top singing honors should go to Steven Rousey (as Singer) and Patrick Lindhorst (as Christopher). Best make-up job goes to Lindsay Schaub, the scar-faced and evil Vandara who is set on taking over Kira’s parents’ property.

Following the show, the young students Thursday morning had the opportunity to ask questions of Hellesen, Sikorski, Ellenstein, Pulver, and Andrus, as well as members

of the cast. Co-lyricist Joyce Sikorski related a story about how the last song in the musical (“Now I Have a Home”) came to her. The song was written very recently when the collaborators felt that Kira needed a final song to express her decision about what to do at the end of the play.

Sikorski told of taking an early morning walk here in Independence and coming across a neighborhood of abandoned houses destroyed in last year’s devastating floods. In the yard of one of the destroyed homes was a maple tree bursting with the vivid colors of autumn. It dawned on her that we all hit periods in our lives where we face ruin and devastation. Kira has gone through such experiences that have damaged her. She turns from her past and looks to a future exemplified by the foliage of the maple tree – hope in the future, hope that she can spin for herself, made stronger by the pain that she has been through. That message is one of the strongest messages of this remarkable book and this remarkable musical production.

Please avail yourself of the rare opportunity to see the birth of a wonderful new musical – not just for kids but for parents and grandparents as well.

I expect – and hope! -- Lois Lowry will be happy with the results when she sees the production tonight. She will also be meeting the public this Saturday morning at 11:30 at the Civic Center in Independence to discuss her work and to autograph her books.

“Gathering Blue” tickets are available at the door of the William Inge Theater on the Independence Community College campus. Adult tickets are \$5; student tickets are \$3. ICC staff and students are admitted free with a pass. Curtain time is 7:30 tonight and tomorrow night; Sunday matinee is at 2:30. I encourage you to attend this outstanding musical and theatrical event for the entire family.