

Review: Title character in 'Anne Frank' odd, quirky



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4:57 p.m. EDT May 1, 2015



(Photo: Special to The News-Press)

CRITIC'S NOTE: After some spirited office discussion and a lot of soul-searching, I've decided to tone down my original "Diary of Anne Frank" review. The review, I realize now, was just too harsh considering the age of the show's star. I've never re-written a review like this in my more than 15 years of reviewing local theater. But I keep picturing my own 13-year-old niece and how she'd react to such a bad write-up. That sealed the deal. My criticisms still stand, but I've softened the language.

I loved so many things about Lab Theater's "The Diary of Anne Frank" — the striking black-and-white set, the inspired sound design, and a tense ending that will haunt you the rest of the night.

But then there's the show's title character. And frankly, I had a lot of problems with actor Kaycie Lee's portrayal of poor, doomed Anne.

Lee is only 13 years old, and I suspect she'll have a good stage career once she gets more experience and stage direction under her belt.

But this review isn't about Lee's potential. It's about her performance in "The Diary of Anne Frank." And that performance is quirky, at best; and twitchy and distracting, at worst.

Lee's unnatural performance kept calling attention to itself and pulling me out of the story, unfortunately. Her version of Anne suffers from an odd, hard-to-understand pronunciation; a habit of giggling constantly (which makes her character come off as a bit insane rather than young, lively and curious); and an overall lack of subtlety. We have to believe in this poor girl and her horrific situation, and that just can't happen here.

I don't mean to discourage Lee from acting. In fact, I'm given hope by the obvious energy and passion she applied to her performance. Only all that energy comes bursting out in weird and unfocused ways.

With time and more guidance from directors and acting coaches, there just might be a great performance in Lee.

It's a shame, because there's some fine acting elsewhere in the play — especially from Matthew DeNoncour as Anne's noble, level-headed father, Otto — and some powerful, memorable scenes. I especially loved the sweet Hanukkah scene.

The play isn't perfect, and it suffers occasionally from spotty pacing and a few weaker actors. But Lab Theater obviously put a lot of work into a show that could have been a riveting, emotional experience.

Director Annette Trossbach and her creative team recreate the Frank family's attic hiding place in grayscale: Everything is black, white or gray. That includes the furniture, the attic beams and skylights above, the food, the costumes, and even the actors' hands and faces (thanks to white or gray make-up). It's a cool, noirish effect that underlines the show's attempts at realism and stark emotions.

I also loved Trossbach's evocative sound design — especially in the show's next-to-the-last scene. After dreaming of escaping Nazi Amsterdam for two years, the hideaways' hopes of escape come crashing down in a visceral mix of panic, fear and (in Otto's case) stoic acceptance.

You never see the Nazi soldiers, but you hear the screech of truck brakes, the stomp of boots, the bark of German voices, and the breaking of glass and doors. Then the stage goes dark, and you're left to imagine all the horror that is yet to come.

Unforgettable stuff. And it made me wish for the play that might have been. A stronger Anne could have made all the difference.

Connect with this reporter: Charles Runnells (News-Press) @charlesrunnells (Twitter)

If you go

•**What:** "The Diary of Anne Frank"

•**When:** 8 p.m. today through Saturday.

•**Where:** The Laboratory Theater of Florida, 1634 Woodford Ave., downtown Fort Myers

•**Tickets:** \$20 (\$12 for students)

•**Info:** 218-0481 or laboratorytheaterflorida.com

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April 22, 2015, 1:56 p.m.



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