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Review: 'Parenting 101' is a family affair

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Musical parody elicits knowing laughs

When the opportunity arose to review "Parenting 101: A Musical Guide to Raising Parents," I knew I only had half of the necessary tools. I know theater, but I sure don't know what it's like to raise a child or two. So with that in mind, I struck a deal with two knowledgeable sources.

The arrangement: My mother and father would be treated to an evening of dinner and theater in Burlington, spent in the company of their eldest child (by far the biggest perk of the night, of course). But they would provide me -- and Free Press readers -- with their takes on the musical parody, which will hold court at the Waterfront Theatre until April 22.

They accepted. So, without further adieu, I give you my take on the musical parody and then Proctor residents Mike and Paula Welch's parent-of-two perspectives.

The child's perspective -- Victoria Welch

Parenting sure ain't high-brow. It's a whirlwind of moments alternately exasperating, messy, joyous, exhausting and scary. There is poop involved. And dinged cars. And clogged pores followed by tubes of Clearasil.

Let's face it, such is hardly the makings of glamorous theater.

It's fitting, then, that Holson Productions' "Parenting 101: A Musical Guide to Raising Parents" provides two hours of kooky imperfection during its five-week run at the Waterfront Theatre. The four-person musical parody presented on the Burlington stage is a quick-hitting series of song and dance numbers that gives its audiences a goofy look at how parents survive the process of raising kids. And while there is reason enough for any non-parents in the audience think twice about EVER enduring the over-the-top moments on stage -- and apologizing profusely to one's parents for what they put them through -- the laughter-inducing moments come so often that one realizes that parenting is survivable and maybe, just maybe, worth the ordeals.

Co-writers Nancy Holson and Jay Falzone have separated about 26 years of a child's life into a neat series of milestones, among them birth, toilet training, summertime, sporting events and wedding days. Each is fraught with its own unique terror and technique, set to the familiar melodies that are tackled with their cast's savvy musical stylings.

The four-member New York City cast exhausts an audience member with their boundless energy and the tasks demanded of them with the "Parenting 101" premise. Actor Amanda Danskin, for instance, engages in kung-fu child warfare in "Can Kids Fight or What?" that requires wrestling with or jumping on the back of castmate Jeff Brooks, rearranges Jeffrey Modereger's adaptable set and delivers sultry take of a mom-modified "Summertime" about a minute later. Brooks, likewise, switches with ease from the role of a four-year-old boy discovering his, er, anatomy in "The Discovery" to a macho sportsdad cheering on his son (I won't spoil the surprise, but know that the costuming choice is brilliant) to a child's best friend -- a tap-dancing, cookie-wielding Gramma.

Audiences will recognize the music revue veterans Holson and Falzone have chosen to parody, each of which

enhances the moment. Lyrics set to Billy Joel's "We Didn't Start the Fire" run through the chaotic list of after school activities to which parents must bus their youngsters with a madcap pace. The disdain-dripping "I Will Always Hate You," delivered by Danskin with pitch-perfect agony, hit cringe-inducingly close to home (had the song ended with a call from backstage of "You know, I can hear you," I would have sworn that it had been lifted right out of my early adolescence). It is almost as much fun to watch audience members nod their heads and laugh during these moments as it is to watch the hijinks unfolding on stage.

"Parenting 101" demonstrates why family sitcoms continue to draw high ratings on prime-time television. This is the performance art that transcends demographics, salary brackets and ages. Parents and adult children see themselves on stage; the laughter stems from personal experience and connection. At this point in life, either parents have left their children at home so as to take in the show or the parent-child dynamic has shifted -- everyone can sit down, listen to some music and laugh.

And from a childless child's perspective, it provides reason to look over and say "I'm so sorry, but thank you so much" to the parents seated nearby.

Father knows best -- Michael Welch

"Parenting 101" is a trip down memory lane. Although the performance and music were very entertaining, it was the "I remember that!" aspect of the production that was the most fun. I kept looking over at my daughter and poking her in order to give her a "That's you up there" look. The best part was that she knew it before I even pointed it out!

I could feel the camaraderie between Jeff Brooks, Amanda Danskin, Ryan Flanigan and Carrie Hill, the four actors on stage. They were having fun and so were we.

This play is very enjoyable, with a fast pace and good music. There is something here for everyone. I would recommend this play to parents, grown-up kids, even a grandma or two. A very good time.

Maternal instincts -- Paula Welch

When my daughter first asked us if we would like to see a play called "Parenting 101," my first thought was, "been there, done that." And when we arrived at the Waterfront Theatre and read of scenes titled "The Birth," "Toilet Training" and "The Rant," I asked her if she was absolutely sure that this was a comedy. When she said that it was a musical parody, I decided to withhold judgment for a bit.

Two hours later, after we stopped laughing and singing, I realized that "Parenting 101" is a musical trip down memory lane for anyone with grown children -- but it's also a slight warning to those in the early stages of parenting or those thinking about starting a family! Nancy Holson and Jay Falzone have modified well-known songs to recreate musical milestones in the life of parents. Every scene had something I remember doing or seeing in the lives of other parents (except for cheerleading dads, who were hilarious but a little weird).

From giving birth to the time a child gives birth, the production was fast-paced, sometimes even tiring. We watched the cast cry, scream, whine, fight, whimper, even rollerblade and fly -- and we laughed until we cried.

The cast channeled their inner children, sometimes a little too well, as well as their parental instincts so as to relate to the majority of veteran parents in the audience. The creative lyrics were energetic and engaging. My favorites were "After School Activities," set to Billy Joel's "We Didn't Start the Fire" with the quick deliver of "and while I wasn't looking, she signed up for gourmet cooking," and the modified take on Disney's "Under the Sea" with "Under the Sheets."

I would highly recommend a trip to the Waterfront Theatre to see this musical with your spouse, grown child or fellow parents for a field trip. But a word to the wise for children bringing parents: Make sure you wear padding on your arms and do not sit in between your folks. You will be elbowed many times during the performance -- and just be ready to suck up to your parents on that long drive back home!

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