

On stage: Wesleyan's 'Carrie: The Musical' a well-crafted Halloween tale

NANCY STEELE BROKAW For The Pantagraph

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Early nights, skittering leaves, pumpkin spice everything — yep, it's that spooky time of year. When better, then, for Illinois Wesleyan University to mount a production of "Carrie: The Musical"?

I know what you're thinking. The words "Carrie" and "musical" just don't go together.

And yet they do in this fast-paced and beautifully executed musical, directed by Scott Susong, and based on Stephen King's 1974 iconic horror novel "Carrie." Later a hit movie, then a Broadway musical flop, and now revamped and becoming a cult classic, "Carrie: The Musical" focuses on an outcast teenage girl with emerging telekinetic powers.

Even if, like me, you've never read the book or seen the movie, you probably know the bones of the story or have seen some iconic images.

Carrie White (a brilliant and heart-touching Melea Niesen) is a misfit at school and overly sheltered at home by her loving religious-fanatic mother (Taylor Glass, letting us see the layers).

Chris (a strong Sasha Rosenbaum) is bully-in-chief and will later collude with her slacker boyfriend Billy (an effectively annoying Joey Maltese-Miller) to dump pig's blood on Carrie at prom. Sue (Nikkita Parsons) serves as an after-the-fact narrator, still trying to make sense of what has happened. She's been best friends with mean girl Chris but has a change of conscience after being part of group that torments Carrie at a vulnerable moment. Sue convinces her sweet boyfriend Tommy (Mason Hanizeski) to take Carrie to the prom in an attempt to set things right. Parsons and Hanizeski give the show a lot of heart in strong performances.

All the ensemble classmates succeed in individuating their characters. If you went to high school, you've met a version of each of them.

Teachers Miss Gardener (Allyse McFall) and Mr. Stephens (Henry Cartaya) do their best to help Carrie and contain the chaos. They do a good job playing parts older than themselves.

Carrie arrives at the prom, looking beautiful, with trying-to-do-right Tommy. Everything goes great. Carrie is accepted and even joins in the dancing (choreography by Anna Corvera, costumes by Beau Hamilton). Her smile, at long last, is radiant.

And then comes the famous turnaround and the worst ending to any prom ever.

The singing in this show is superb (vocal direction by Nole Jones). Everybody sounds great singing with everybody else, which is no small thing. Twenty-five easy-to-like, mostly pop-rock songs are packed into two hours (musical direction by Charles Berggren). Carrie's duet with her mother, "Evening Prayer," and Tommy's solo, "Dreamer in Disguise," are two of the standouts, though there are many more.

Scenic co-designers Curtis Trout and Mars M. Mulvin, along with lighting designer Michael Rathbun, have created a completely believable 1970s gym that is cleverly designed to become other places in a matter of seconds.

"Carrie: The Musical" is intended for mature audiences. It contains the Halloween-y horror factor, including that famous bucket of blood, as well as other elements. Beyond the scary stuff, this well-crafted musical is also a powerful cautionary tale for what happens when people are ostracized just for being different and, by extension, a heartfelt plea for all of us to just be kind to one another.

IF YOU GO

What: Illinois Wesleyan University's "Carrie: The Musical"

When: 7:30 p.m. Thursday, Friday and Saturday; 2 p.m. Sunday

Where: Jerome Mirza Theater, 2 Ames Plaza East, IWU campus

Cost: \$12-\$16; call 309-556-3011

Running time: 1 hour and 50 minutes with a 10-minute intermission



Melea Niesen plays the role of Carrie White in Illinois Wesleyan University's production of "Carrie: The Musical."

KAYLA SANDERS, IWU SCHOOL OF THEATRE ARTS