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Theatre Aspen brings iconic musical 'Annie' to new Hurst Theatre

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It might have been raining outside Theatre Aspen's Hurst Theatre last week as 'Annie,' the second of three summer productions from the nonprofit, premiered, but as any Broadway fan knows, 'the sun'll come out tomorrow.'

In fact, the sun was out inside the tent that night, as the 17-person cast — including one well-trained Aspen Mountain ski patrol pooch — all gave stellar performances of the Broadway hit that has produced some of the most recognizable and hummable tunes in musical history.

For the few that don't know the story, 'Annie' is the 1982 (and 1999) film based on the 1977 Broadway musical derived from the 1924 comic strip about Annie, the spunky, Depression-era orphan who believes (and sings on more than a few occasions) that 'the sun'll come out tomorrow,' and who melts the heart of millionaire Oliver Warbucks.

It's often a mixed bag when pre-teens make up nearly half the cast, but the musical's orphans, led by a surprisingly nuanced and on-key Julia Foran as Annie, were as adorable as they were talented, equally channeling the Depression-era malaise of discarded, hapless children and kids just wanting to have fun.

But while the kids were busy breaking your heart and making you smile, local thespian Nina Gabianelli was busy stealing the show as the miserly, alcoholic headmistress of the orphanage, Miss Hannigan. Her musical theater chops have never been in question (she spent years working at the now-defunct Crystal Palace), but her comedic timing and just-over-the-top-enough acting style helped reverberate laughter throughout the intimate 150-person theater.

'It's a role that, I have to admit, I've avoided over the years,' Gabianelli said. 'Sharing the stage with children and dogs is never an actor's dream. But I'm finally at an age where I can just enjoy myself up there. And those little girls are really great. They've all done shows before and they're getting some really great professional experience out of this.'

While Gabianelli had been avoiding the role, Theatre Aspen Artistic Director Paige Price knew she would be perfect for it.

'My idea was actually to open the season with 'Annie,' Price said. 'But Nina wasn't available. We've never done something this big and commercial, and I knew she would be just terrific in the part.'

Fortunately for Theatre Aspen, and the plethora of Aspen summer theater goers, Gabianelli was able to work out a deal with her boss at the Aspen Historical Society, where she serves as vice president of programming and education.

'It's an amazing opportunity to work professionally as an actor in your own town,' Gabianelli said. 'But I can't give up the job that pays my mortgage for a 10-week gig, no matter how good. I've been very lucky to work out a deal with my current job and Theatre Aspen so that I can do both.'

Gabianelli's presence in the play also underscores a larger trend within Theatre Aspen: the inclusion of more locals in plays that have typically featured actors from New York and L.A. In addition to the orphans and Gabianelli, local David Leddingham gave an excellent turn as Becky's blue-collar working husband in Theatre Aspen's first production of the summer, "Becky's New Car."

"As I've gotten to know the locals and their strengths more and more," Price said, "I realize what they're good at. And as a result, I try to think about plays that have great roles for them."

"Annie" will run at the Hurst Theatre until Aug. 20, while "Becky's New Car" wraps up on July 23. Theatre Aspen's third and final production of the summer, "Vices: A Love Story" which Price describes as "American Idol" meets "So You Think You Can Dance" opens July 29 and closes Aug. 20.

For more information or to purchase tickets, visit [www.theatraspen.org](http://www.theatraspen.org) [damien@aspendailynews.com](mailto:damien@aspendailynews.com)



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The production of "Annie" will be performed, mostly by locals, by Theatre Aspen at the new Hurst Theatre this summer.

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