

A review

Only a Kingdom is a new perspective on an old story

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Special Writer

Mill Mountain Theatre's current production, *Only a Kingdom*, is much more than I expected.

This entirely new work – it's actually a work in progress- and this is its first full production anywhere. It is the story of the real-life fairy tale romance between David, who was England's King Edward VIII-to-be, and American divorcée Wallis Simpson. As most of you surely know, politics and protocol prevented the marriage between these two unlikely lovers, so the king gave up his empire in order to spend his life with the woman he loved.

I guess my expectations were a little low because of the newness of the work, and because I could not imagine how such a story – and a true one at that – could be made into a major musical.

Well, I was wrong, and now I know. Author, composer and lyricist Judith Shubow Steir has woven a beautiful and compassionate story from the lives of the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, and has accented it with really nice, melodious songs. And to add to the treat, there's even significant comic relief in the personages of Elsa Maxwell and Winston Churchill. A very grand surprise, indeed. Add to the mix a stellar cast and top-notch production, and the result is an evening of really fine entertainment.

David Staller and Crista Moore as the star-crossed central characters are real standouts. I had no trouble believing their characters' feelings, which ranged from exuberance to

love to despair. And their physical resemblance to the real Duke and Duchess is astonishing.

Sally Struthers is funny and appropriately bawdy as Elsa Maxwell, a role about as far from Gloria Stivik as you can get. Adam Matalon is also very zany and memorable as Elsa's assistant, Nigel. More comedy comes from George Merner as Winston Churchill, a role he has played often.

More dignified performances are turned in by Jo Ann Cunningham as Queen Mary, David Pursley as the monarchy's public relations advisor, and Monica Wemitt as Wallis' Aunt Bessie. All are theatre veterans with outstanding credentials.

When you go see this show, remember that it is indeed a work in progress, and still subject to revisions and alterations. That is part of the magic of live performance: the fact that the audience is a big part of the creative process. The show is long, and will undoubtedly be trimmed and tightened before the "final" version is reached. That is normal, too.

Only a Kingdom has been extended through Nov. 2, which gives you plenty of time to make your reservations and attend. Your support of this show can guarantee that future world premieres will soon be seen in Roanoke. The fact that we got this one is a testament to the reputation that Mill Mountain Theater has achieved in the theatrical community. This is an opportunity you should not pass up.