

Hard knocks, good fortune: 'Annie' returns to Jackson

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A popular Broadway hit about one little orphan is one way to get real-life youngsters to adopt a bigger and broader outlook.

McLaurin and Richland Attendance Center choral teacher Cynthia Wallace will be bringing 32 middle and high school youth to Annie this week, to hear about the heroine's hard-knock life and Daddy Warbucks-good fortune.

But song and dance as well as story are the things that'll stick with them.

"It broadens their horizons," Wallace says. "They're familiar with the story of Annie and will be more interested to see it in a different format - onstage as opposed to a movie. The approach is so different."

The national tour of Annie plays at Jackson's Thalia Mara Hall at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday and Thursday.

This is Annie's 30th anniversary tour and the third time it's graced the Jackson stage. Annie also played here in presenter W. Kessler Ltd.'s inaugural year, 1983, and again 14 years ago, marketing director Averyell Kessler says.

The popular musical is a welcome treat. "We always love to have Annie here because there are always children who have not seen Annie," Kessler says. "We always love having young people come to the theater and Annie gets them in."

The musical is based on Little Orphan Annie of comic strip fame and follows the 11-year-old's adventures as she sneaks out on her hard-knock life at the New York City Municipal Orphanage to find her parents. She's returned to the nasty orphanage director Miss Hannigan, but Annie's luck turns again when she's selected to spend Christmas at billionaire Oliver Warbucks' mansion.

The show won seven Tonys in 1977, the year it opened on Broadway, including awards for Best Musical, Book and Score. With music by Charles Strouse and book by Thomas Meehan, it's again directed by its lyricist Martin Charnin, who brought the original hit to Broadway.

David Barton, who plays Daddy Warbucks in this national tour, warms to the character's transformation throughout the story.

"Most people who come to see the show have seen the show before, or seen the movie, or at least heard the music. They know what they're coming to see. But what I find interesting about Warbucks is, within the structure of the play, he's the only character that really changes," Barton says by phone from the tour.

Warbucks starts out as a gruff, all-business businessman whose only concern is making money. But he is transformed by 11-year-old Annie into someone who acknowledges his own need for other people and that one thing missing from his life was someone to share life with.

"Within the world of the play, he's the richest man there is and very, very powerful - the polar opposite of Annie, who's this little girl with absolutely no power and no money and no anything," Barton says.

The show's recipe for success lies in its catchy and well-crafted components and its enduring message of



optimism and hope and taking the steps to fulfill your dreams.

"Annie's not satisfied with sitting in the orphanage, waiting. She goes out into the world and seeks out her dream," Barton says. "Those types of messages - especially now, that message of hope and optimism that things are going to get better - audiences love to hear and what we as people long to experience, even if it's only vicariously through a play for two and a half hours."

Barton, a theater teacher and community theater founder from Nashville, is in his first gig on the professional stage since 1983. And, he's busting that old adage about not acting with kids or animals (for fear of being upstaged).

"It's really not that bad," he says, laughing. "The kids are great, and I'm not ever onstage with the dog except at the very end of the show."

Two dogs travel with the tour for the role of Sandy, the abandoned mutt who befriends Annie. And all the dogs that play Sandy are orphaned dogs, rescued from shelters, trained by animal trainer Bill Berloni to become the canine actors.

They do an amazing job, Barton says. "The dog is so well-trained, that sometimes his performance is better than ours is," he kids.

"It hurts the ego a little bit at the end of the show when the dog gets more applause than I do, but you kind of grow to expect that. I try not to take it personally."