

'Willy Wonka' sweetens smiles for Shuler audiences

By Tim Keller
Special to The Chronicle-News
 RATON — Director Gail Dixon-Willden took Roald Dahl's beloved 1964 children's story "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory," and the two popular movies that followed it, to create a Technicolor funfest on the Shuler Theater stage over the weekend.

In performances Friday and Saturday nights and Sunday afternoon, Raton Youth Theater's annual August musical, "Roahl Dahl's Willy Wonka Junior," was a rollicking hit with packed audiences who enjoyed watching children at play.

That seems to be exactly Willden's trick: With a cast of several dozen children ranging in age from 4 to 16, she creates an environment where her young actors are simply busy playing. There was nary a jitter apparent on opening night: the kids were just having too much fun.

Yet the well-known story moved right along. Famed chocolatier Willy Wonka is ready to retire and searching for just the right person to whom he can hand over the operations of his candy factory. He places five Golden Tickets within five candy bars distributed around the world; the five kids who find them will come tour the chocolate factory. Willy will choose one as his successor.

After his Shuler debut as Dr. Van Helsing in last fall's "Dracula," Nathan Coleman went the other direction entirely to don a purple suit and hat as Willy Wonka. He had fun conducting the proceedings, complete with plenty of charming song and dance.

Spenser Willden was well cast as Charlie Bucket, the boy who wins the chocolate factory. Willden has been in several previous Shuler productions, but never before has he stepped up to the plate like this to take on a role: He's growing into an actor.

The other Golden Ticket-winning characters provided young actors with opportunities galore for over-the-top fun. Johnny Gentry ate his way into the audience's heart as the German Augustus Gloop while singing "I Eat More." Zoë Gomez, who always has more fun than anyone else on the stage, played his German mother, Mrs. Gloop.

Ila Raine Medina hilariously chewed the scenery along with an endless supply of gum as Violet Beauregarde of Georgia, accompanied by her mother Mrs. Beauregarde played by Lijah Medina. Both spoke with a Southern accent. Violet's undoing is chewing a forbidden ball of blueberry gum, which turns her into a huge blue ball.

Meigan Deater played Californian Mike Teavee, addicted to TV, Nintendo, and all things electronic. Deater's song, "I See It All on TV," sung with Jacque Alcorn and Kate Little, was timely and well received.



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Above, disguised as The Candy Man to distribute his golden tickets, Willy Wonka (Nathan Coleman) chats with young Charlie Bucket (Spenser Willden) as other children look on. Music director Bill Cray, in red beret, directs pianist Carol Simmons who is unseen below the stage. At left, music director Bill Cray (in red beret) conducts Willy Wonka (Nathan Coleman, in purple hat) and the Oompa Loompas as they sing a happy song.

Clair Willden rounded out the group of ticket winners playing petulant Brazilian Veruca Salt, accompanied by her mom, played by Nathaly Torres.

The story focuses on Charlie Bucket, who is too poor to even buy a candy bar, but Willy Wonka takes a liking to him. Charlie lives with his extended family, including all four grandparents — played by Isaiah Duran, Alexandra Muniz, Christopher Mandonado, and Breana Brown — who are so poor that they share one bed.

One of the play's most touching scenes is a song and dance, "Think Positive," shared by Charlie Bucket and his father,

played by Elijah Clark.

Music director Bill Cray coordinated the young cast and the 22 songs, with pianist Carol Simmons hidden below the stage. The songs by Leslie Bricusse and Anthony Newley are a big part of this play's widespread success, and the young cast handled them as they did everything else, playfully and smiling.

Visiting from Texas, Curt Espinoza didn't even get into the program, but he took a walk-on part and had fun with it: each time his red-suited janitor came to clear something from the stage, he found a way to get a laugh and even applause from the audience.

Additional parts were played by Laura Robertson, Zeb Medina, and Asia Gomez. Various Oompa Loompas, Squirrels, and Candy Man Kids were played by Macey Espinoza, Avery Feldman, Sophie Medina, Brandon Robertson, Ben Sanchez, Ella Sanchez and Allorah Solano.

Others were Brittany Gutierrez, Rebecca Ramirez, Andrew Torres, Junior Torres, Victoria Apodaca, Joie Chiamonte, Alexis Sanchez, Billie Sneed and Kristina Sneed.

The costumes fit the bill perfectly, designed and created by a team led by Misty Gomez. In fact, both cos-

umes and sets added immensely to the bright delight of the productions; it was a marvel that the show was cast, rehearsed, built, and performed all within a span of only four weeks.

One secret of the set design's success was that the children themselves were enlisted to apply the paint. Especially fun was a colorful background with pop-out windows, a concept taken from "Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In" and used here to great effect. Four of the Golden Ticket winners are obnoxious tykes who meet horrible fates within the machinery of the chocolate factory, but each reappears from behind

the colorful window panels none the worse for wear.

After the opening night performance, the young cast formed a pair of reception lines in the Shuler Theater lobby, but perhaps the busiest person was director Gail Dixon-Willden. One after another, the young actors kept coming to her to collect big hugs, providing a glimpse into the magic of how the director is able, year after year, to assemble dozens of children and have them produce such great shows. They're clearly having fun and feeling safe and successful under her direction. They like it so much that they keep coming back for hugs.

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