

# 'Annie Get Your Gun' off target

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Let's face it, if it didn't have so many great Irving Berlin songs, *Annie Get Your Gun* wouldn't bear re-viving.

The 1946 musical is saddled with one of the limpest excuses for a book that ever got up on its hind legs and proclaimed itself a comedy. And it hasn't improved with age. There's only so much you can do with it. The current Sacramento LOA production deserves credit for doing most of that.

Only so much, that is, barring the miraculous return of Ethel Merman in her prime. When she bowed in the role of Annie Oakley, the crack shot from the backwoods, she wowed, including the rare critic who noticed that between songs the star was working in a void.

Under the tent this week, it's Vicki Lawrence treading the gossamer and staying aloft with some grace. Her characterization as a love-struck innocent who becomes the sharp-shooting star of a Wild West show, is played sweetly and with more feeling than the script by Herbert and Dorothy Fields deserves.

The voice, meanwhile, isn't among the surest to have embraced *I Got the Sun in the Mornin'* or

*They Say It's Wonderful*, but it serves.

Alas, to serve, in this particular musical, is slightly disappointing. *There's No Business Like Show Business*, *Lost in His Arms*, *Doin' What Comes Naturally* and, of course, *You Can't Get a Man With a Gun* also grace the title role. With so little of merit in the flimsy love story, one longs for a set of pipes to raise the hairs on the back of the neck. Where Lawrence shines is in the comic numbers, sharing *Anything You Can Do* with Robert R. McCormick as Frank Butler, the man who can't stand being shown up by a woman, especially one he's in love with. Give her a piece of shtick like Annie's induction into the Sioux tribe (with mock cross-cultural choreography by David Thome) and former TV sketch-artist Lawrence is in her element. It's even possible to forgive her for slathering the same West Texas twang she uses on "Mama's Family" all over Berlin's clever lyrics.

To spruce up the rest of the evening, director Walter Painter has tried to tie the aura of the Wild West extravaganza into the built-in tent show atmosphere. Stagehands wear Buffalo Bill insignia and undertake a little dance bit. Noble Dinse's red-white-and-blue themed scenery extends to

strands of flags running up the big-top aisles. Annie's big shooting trick, executed atop a "running" buffalo, makes for pretty good distraction, too. To keep the proceedings under 2½ hours, a subplot involving another set of young lovers has been left out. Does anybody care?

Little Stephen Jackson, as Little Jake Oakley, who teaches big sister Annie to read, is appropriately irresistible among nicely poised stage siblings Kimi Staples, Melody Clinger, and Camille Ruggles. Gordon Goodman, Jen Nelson, Kenneth Bridges, Zale Kessler, and David deBerry, as assorted showfolk, wring creditable work from precious little. Kessler, sounding vaguely Russian as the monosyllabic Chief Sitting Bull, has to tiptoe the line of racial stereotyping.

Luckily, the script doesn't take itself seriously enough to offend. Yet beyond it's other lacks, *Annie Get Your Gun* suffers from an attitude problem. Its resolution is that everything will be fine between Annie and Frank if she just pretends he can outshoot her. What's hard to understand is why she'd continue to want this insecure baby who bolts at any little affront to his macho supremacy?

McCormick is hand-



Vicki Lawrence stars in *Annie Get Your Gun* this week at Sacramento LOA.

some, personable, and sings well, but from the moment he warbles out *The Girl That I Marry*, insisting she be "as soft and as pink as a nursery," he's swimming against the tide of audience sympathy, and the current only gets swifter as it becomes plane that Annie, not Frank, will have to "wise up" for them to get together. The actor does what he can — which is about all anybody can do with as awkward a property as "Annie Get Your Gun" — except wish that Irving Berlin had been partnered with other writers.