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Page: 4A

“Play showcases young local talent”

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MUNCIE --Collin Warren. Remember that name. My guess is that we'll be hearing it a lot in the future, attached to the words 'presents on Broadway.'"

Warren, 21, is the writer and director of a new musical called Bridges. I caught the performance Saturday at Muncie Civic's Studio Theatre. After watching this touching, funny and witty musical, one thing was clear: this guy is oozing with talent.

His musical, based on the tragic death of a young woman in Portland, has the makings of a big hit. All the elements are there: catchy Rent-like songs; a fascinating based-on-a-true-story plot; hip, creative staging; a young, beautiful cast, and plenty of teen angst.

Warren performed all of the music --which ranged from jazz to indie folk to rock ballads --for the show on a keyboard.

The play focuses on a Portland street family, kids who have left their traditional families for nontraditional bonds created under the city's many bridges. Members of this particular family were cast in the media spotlight in 2003 after the death of one of its members, a young woman with developmental disabilities. She was brutally murdered by the family after just three days on the streets with them.

The musical is a strong ensemble piece. All of the actors play more than one role, changing glasses, jackets and hats to transform into teens, school counselors, parents and more. Adam Fried, Rusty Ramstrom, David Black, Celeste Reno, Kristen Calvin, Rebecca Zygmontowicz, Paul Keller and Kevin Heller all deserve kudos for taking on the challenge.

Some of the songs need a bit of polish (too wordy) and the show needs to be tightened up a bit (it ran over two hours). But overall, it's a great accomplishment for a 21-year-old local playwright.

Warren, originally from Vancouver, Wash., did a good job of weaving this story together, bringing concepts full circle. He cast the roles creatively (a murderer then plays the detective on the case; a murdered girl plays the reporter investigating her death) and used some very clever staging.

The musical opens against the backdrop of an invasion of Iraq protest in 2003 with the

song *Activists on Parade*. The ensemble is on stage with fists and anti-Bush signs raised. This is where the street kids hang during the day, panhandling and protesting. The action then moves into the office of a detective on the young woman's murder case.

Page 2
"Play Showcase Young Talent"
The Star Press. Muncie, IN. Nov. 15, 2004

He offers plenty of background for the audience and lays the groundwork for what follows, tiny windows into why some of these kids left conventional society behind for the streets of Portland.

One chooses to murder an old man for some quick cash. Another turns to drugs to avoid the reality of molestation. Both end up in 'the family.'

After murdering the old guy, James (Adam Fried) and Aiden (Rusty Ramstrom) tell of their dreams of better days in San Francisco. Both are strong vocalists and, after a prop mishap, we learn that Fried's show-must-go-on attitude is the mark of a true pro.

Celeste Reno was perfectly smart-mouthed and troubled as Danny, a smart teen who gives in to the pressures of drugs and alcohol after her step-father sexually abuses her. She eventually comes to the conclusion that as you get older, things do not get any Easier.

We also get a peek inside the home of Samantha, the young developmentally disabled murder victim. Rebecca Zygmuntowicz was engaging as the bright-eyed young girl who loves to draw. Zygmuntowicz brilliantly delivered the most emotionally-charged song of the evening, *Just Smart Enough*, after being stood up on prom night. The tear-jerker is a well-crafted, powerful piece of music that seemed to be custom-made for Zygmuntowicz. The highlight of the show.

Kristen Calvin, Paul Keller and Kevin Heller did a fine job of playing the parents and counselors needed in each scene.

The second act takes us back to the protest that opened the show and over the next three days Samantha spent with the street kids. This act had more music, including a funny number from prostitute Rafael (David Black), who lectures about becoming your own Economy. Black flips that fun-loving attitude upside down later for the emotional ballad *Lament*.

Samantha, who runs away after a blowout with her parents, is invited into the family by Aiden. They discover a mutual crush while *Singing the Same Song*. But that bliss is short-lived as the family itself begins to crumble with James as its leader. We never get the whole story on what exactly happened to Samantha. One of the street kids implies that we never will.

What we did get, without a doubt, was an evening of great entertainment.

Bridges will continue at Muncie Civic's Studio Theatre, 222 E. Main St., at 8 p.m. Nov. 18-20. Tickets are \$10. Reservations: (765) 288-PLAY. Contact entertainment writer Michelle Kinsey at 213-5822.

Page 3
"Play Showcase Young Talent"
The Star Press. Muncie, IN. Nov. 15, 2004

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