

LET THE EAGLE FLY! (3/10)

The long and dramatic struggle for basic labor and civil rights by the California farm workers led by Cesar Chavez is wonderfully told in an exceptional new musical, "Let the Eagle Fly," that's now playing a limited engagement in San Jose, the city where Chavez began the organizing career that brought him worldwide acclaim.

The musical score is excellent, as are the musicians and the actors - some in their teens or younger, others with broad experience. They tell the story of Chavez and the early struggles of the farm workers union he founded in 1964 and led for three decades - in lively song and dance, often with humor. And for all its artistry, the story they tell is accurate, down to small details. I know first-hand of the events dramatized, since I covered them in detail as the SF Chronicle's labor editor.

Chavez' start as an organizer for the Community Services Organization, his unwavering belief in the non-violent tactics of Mohandas Gandhi, his fasts and other personal sacrifices and those of his sometimes reluctant family . . .

The rushed and exhausting motions of vegetable pickers, wielding 18-inch hoes as they scurry over the fields like spiders, bent double, rhythmically bending, stooping and straightening, as they scoop up lettuce, carrots and other produce. Bend and pick. Bend and pick. Endlessly . . .

The fruit pickers, making their way swiftly through vineyards, reaching high to pluck the grapes. Reaching, stretching and picking. Reach, stretch, pick. Endlessly. Fast and endlessly.

The racist growers who fought fiercely to avoid giving their Chicano grape pickers decent pay and working conditions . . . the Kern County sheriff who sided with the growers . . . the dogged determination of Chavez and his followers . . . the nationwide grape boycott that finally won the workers the right to bargain with the growers and, in doing so, finally win union contracts guaranteeing them decent pay and working conditions . . . Chavez' untimely death in 1993 . . .

The words and music show and tell all that and much more, and the audience can't help but be drawn into the dramatic finale. We were quickly on our feet, cheering, applauding, clapping rhythmically, singing along with the actors, followed by a standing, cheering, much deserved ovation.

Only four more performances are left in the run of "Let the Eagle Fly" in the San Jose City College Theater - Thursday March 25, at 8 p.m.; Friday March 26, at 8 p.m.; Sunday, March 28, at 2 p.m.; and a final performance Wednesday, March 31, at 7:30 p.m. Details on ticket availability, prices and directions are available at www.lettheaglefly.com.

Viva la huelga!