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## Creative, superbly acted 'Dog's Life' deserves a pat on the head

By **ROBERT TRUSSELL**  
The Kansas City Star

It shouldn't have worked. It had everything going against it. I cringed every time I looked at a publicity photo showing actor John-Michael Zuerlein with his mouth open pretending to be a dog.

But I've learned that often the shows I dread the most turn out to be the most interesting. In the case of "A Dog's Life," a world-premiere musical at the American Heartland Theatre, I discovered a show that was audacious, creative in unpredictable ways and surprisingly effective in its ability to draw laughter and a few tears from a willing audience.

Writer Sean Grennan and composer Leah Okimoto have crafted a musical that seems custom-made for dog lovers — or animal lovers of any kind. This is a love story about a man named Joel who reluctantly accepts a shelter dog into his life and discovers the bond he shares with Jack (the dog) is more profound than any of his relationships with people.

The narrative traces their friendship from day one, when Joel comes to an animal shelter ostensibly to find a dog for his ex-girlfriend, to the inevitable end. In the process we watch Joel change from a driven go-getter to one who has grown mellow and reflective.

The Heartland production, directed by Paul Hough, is elevated by fine performances. The actors commit themselves to the material 100 percent and their collective effort pays big dividends.

Carrying the bulk of the show on his shoulders is Zuerlein as Jack. His is an exceptional performance by any measure, especially in his ability to capture a dog's antic, sometimes melodramatic personality. Zuerlein is onstage perhaps 90 percent of the time and puts tremendous energy into his embodiment of what Grennan intends to be a kind of Every Dog.

But he is matched by Nicholas Ward as Big Dog and Jessalyn Kincaid as Little Dog. They are Jack's Mutt-and-Jeff shelter mates who became major supporting characters as the show unfolds. Ward knows how to bring subtlety to a role that demands to be played broadly while Kincaid, who just gets more interesting every time she takes the stage, is spectacular in her evocation of a high-strung little canine who never tires of chasing her tail.

The straight man, of course, is Joel. But Kurt Robbins demonstrates an agreeably light touch in a nuanced performance that acquires dramatic weight as the show progresses. These actors are fine singers.

Grennan is a clever writer and he knows how to imbue jokes early that pay off much later in the show. His lyrics are generally witty and acerbic, although they do occasionally reflect a preoccupation with dog droppings that could have been soft-pedaled without harming the material. Okimoto's score reflects no clear style but the music seems perfectly suited to each scene and every changing mood.

I won't be surprised if "A Dog's Life" becomes a big hit in regional theaters. All it has to do is find that infinite audience of dog lovers. And there were plenty of those present at the press-night performance. As you might expect, they awarded the show a standing ovation.

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### **THE SHOW**

"A Dog's Life" runs through April 15 at the American Heartland Theatre. Call (816) 842-9999 or go to [www.ahk.com](http://www.ahk.com).

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