



THEATER REVIEW: 'Plaid' mixes, matches music and comedy

By Mark Hughes Cobb / Staff Writer

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Though "Forever Plaid" is a jukebox musical, built around vocal-group pop of the '50s and '60s, it's as much musical-comedy, light as high tenor, despite its semi-dark premise: A quartet of crooning pals, killed in a car crash, get limbo-reprieve to finally sing that a final concert.

The comedy in this Theatre Tuscaloosa production is easy as the rhythms, clean-cut -- there is an odd entendre or two, nothing that won't go over most kids' heads -- and simple enjoyment that might've popped up, polished and lint-free, on a '50s variety show. The "Lady of Spain" bit, re-enacting some of the famously silly acts from "The Ed Sullivan Show" -- Sullivan gets more name-checking in this script than any of the singers or songwriters "Forever Plaid" borrows from -- earns big laughs, even though the gags aren't, by themselves, particularly noteworthy. The chuckles are almost by-product, a cumulative effect of good-natured goof as this brief -- opening night ran 75 minutes -- one-act show steps, in unison of course, toward close. Maybe with this kind of fluff, it's best to leave 'em wanting more. Another spoonful of sugar might not have gone down so smoothly.

Director-choreographer Stacy Alley continues her deft hand with light entertainment -- the UA prof's also directed, choreographed, or directed-choreographed "Bye Bye Birdie," "The Marvelous Wonderettes," "The Drowsy Chaperone," "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee" and others for Theatre Tuscaloosa -- with musical director Terry Moore sharpening those close harmonies to help the performers emulate guys who'd been singing together much longer than the few weeks of actual rehearsals. The boys in the band, Jinx (Jacob Abbott), Smudge (Colton Crowe), Frankie (Alex Freeman) and Sparky (Parker Reeves) are easy company. Alley's urged them toward reality -- though the script does them few favors there -- and the absorption works, even if the show runs a bit rough at the start, where the only way to differentiate is by ailment.

Grace notes resound throughout the score, a lovingly re-created set of 20 or so tuneful ditties, some near-forgotten, some probably unfamiliar to anyone under 60. But each is from old-school pop songcraft, the kind that can grab you within 12 bars. Built in are some four-part adaptations of melodies not meant for this kind of group, but spoilers would ruin the joke; you'll notice them.

Some would be diamonds no matter the era or arrangement. The tear-jerking "Cry," a hit by Johnnie Ray (for pop-culture trivia fans, that's the "poor old Johnnie Ray" of Dexy and the Midnight Runners' "Come On Eileen," and the first verse of Billy Joel's "We Didn't Start the Fire." Ray's also name-checked in songs by Eartha Kitt, Tom Jones, Van Morrison and Billy Idol) and The Four Lads, would rake the heart even if sung by a tone-deaf soloist. Happily that theory's not tested, as Abbott delivers a shining spotlight rendition. Though the show's largely built around group arrangements, each of the guys gets a moment or three to stand out, such as Crowe reaching manfully for the bottom notes on a bluesy (for this group) "Sixteen Tons," while the other guys add the hoo-hah bounce of "Chain Gang," in an apt medley; or Reeves sitting in on piano when Moore goes on "union break," and delivering the sharpest deadpan lines; or Freeman taking on the heartfelt plea that keeps the gang together as time draws to an end.

Andy Fitch crafted a set properly straightforward for such a direct show: a proscenium lit with stars, its curves suggesting the arts -- deco and nouveau -- that inspired old-school theaters and clubs. Lighting designer Erin Hisey hits the boys in flattering hues, a real bonus as, with the exception of props -- the many, many props -- there's a dearth of visual novelty onstage, by design.

A couple of moments, mostly in the early going, could have been tightened. For such a brief show, moribund air's especially noticeable. There was also a bit of mike/sound mix unevenness going on, which you wouldn't expect with just four miked singers and three on-stage musicians.

Fair warning: The Belafonte-esque "Caribbean Plaid" bounces along nicely until actors leave the stage and penetrate the audience. The cringing sound almost drowned out the music. It happens again during "Heart and Soul," so if you're one of those who dread being pointed out, exhorted forward in a show you paid money to see, don't sit down front or on an aisle, and whatever you do, don't raise your hand. If, however, you're like Melinda on opening night, who gamely and happily played along, step right up. Her presence, her joie de vivre mostly overcame the awkwardness.

Performances of “Forever Plaid” continue at 2 p.m. Sunday, Wednesday, Saturday and Sept. 16, with 7:30 p.m. shows Thursday and Friday, all in the Bean-Brown Theatre at Shelton State Community College. Tickets are \$16 for students; \$20 for seniors, Shelton State employees and members of the military; and \$24 general. For more, call 391-2727, or see the site at www.theatretusc.com.