

WACKY TEXAS WEDDING BINDS THE TIES

"Dearly Beloved"

Review

By BURNLEY GARELICK

"Dearly Beloved." That's a song from the ever popular Broadway musical comedy "Li'l Abner." It's a lollapalooza production number where Dogpatch preacher Marryin' Sam sings about his Eight-Dollar Wedding with the effervescence of a shaken can of soda pop.

So what does that song have to do with the show of the same title currently on stage at Florence Playhouse?

Both are comedies about love and marriage set in the South — Arkansas in "Li'l Abner" and Texas in "Dearly Beloved."

While "Dearly Beloved" suggests musical numbers — you can almost cue the songs — the only music comes in snatches of recorded country songs like "Pistol Packin' Mama" during scene changes. The play's roller coaster rhythm is propelled by laughter.

The South lends itself to laughter, perhaps because the South is larger than life. We love accents and exaggerated storytelling, and "Dearly Beloved" characters spin stories and drawl a-plenty, y'all.

And there's plenty of cornpone laughter as one zinger follows another, from one connipation fit to the next, as the town's big elegant wedding turns into a potluck with a huge hog simmering behind The Tabernacle of the Lamb church; three bickering sisters; a fortune teller who sees coins in the stars; a UPS driver shanghaied into performing a wedding; an enterprising florist; twins, one of whom is the bride; a rattle-brained reluctant fiancé; a suspicious spouse; a gun-totin' Highway Patrolman; a snooty

groom's mother and a missing bride and groom.

In all this hokum, will the preacher ever say "Dearly beloved?"

Will the elder sister admit to the change of life? Will the middle sister get her fiancé to the altar? Will the youngest sister reveal her secret? Will the sisters settle their differences and revive their gospel trio? And what about the runaway bride and groom?

When laughter comes easy, the writers have done their job — and the writers of "Dearly Beloved" have impressive credentials from stage and screen, Broadway and Hollywood.

Writing credits for Jessie Jones, Nicholas Hope and Jamie Wooten include the movie "Kingdom Come" with LL Cool J and Whoopi Goldberg, Disney TV series "Teacher's Pet" and TV's "Golden Girls."

The show at the Playhouse is

directed by Mary Tuck, an actor and friend of the writers. Tuck keeps the cast members on their toes, marking their cues and delivering their lines for maximum hilarity.

It's a relatively large cast for the intimate Playhouse stage, or maybe it's because all 11 local actors are simultaneously in perpetual motion. Nevertheless, they're all at ease and adept with comedy and deserve buckets of applause for pulling off this wacky wedding.

Tres Eberhard, known for tickling the ivories and singing, is a standout in her acting debut as Honey Raye Futrelle, the boisterous eldest sister with multiple consecutive spouses and frequent hot flashes.

Sally Wantz returns to the stage as definitive Miss Geneva, shrewd proprietor of Beaucoup Bouquets, always on the lookout for a deal.

Bountiful backstage costumer Sue Sweatt steps onstage

as Nelda Lightfoot, light-fingered, digitally dexterous fortuneteller.

Courtney Ricketts is double trouble in her first speaking role as winsome Tina Jo Dubberly and her twin sister Gina Jo Dubberly.

Carole Blalock, fondly remembered as the Chrysler Building in the hilarious "Lend Me A Tenor" some years ago, is perfect as imperious mother Patsy Price saving her son the groom from a fate worse than death. Paula Burnette is single-minded Twink Futrelle betting her marital future on this wedding. Mary Jeanne Kuhar plays the only sympathetic character, Frankie Futrelle Dubberly, mother of the bride who is hiding a secret.

The male actors are especially delightful — Grant Howard as good-natured Justin Waverly, seminary student working as a UPS driver who stumbles into his calling just in time; Paul

Friend as swaggering Highway Patrolman John Curtis Buntner; Jamison Smith as Dub Dubberly, amiable good ol' boy with secrets of his own; and James Bonisteel as bumbling Wiley Hicks, Twink's reluctant fiancé who never knows where he's at.

"Dearly Beloved" concludes

Friday, Saturday and Sunday, July 31, Aug. 1 and 2.

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