

THEATRE

Review: *Leader of the Pack*

Fun, energetic musical by well-honed company

by Deborah S. McGee

Dynamite. High-energy. Power-packed. Such strong words describe *Leader of the Pack*, current Mainstage production at the Hult Center. Only four productions remain. Go now. Great musical theater doesn't come 'round again on videotape.

Elements: first—fun, skillful and exuberant choreography by Rich Gray, especially rollicking in the title number. Then there are the slinky, sparkly and daring costumes by Joe Zingo, Sue (Fiddlin') Hunnel and Time Warp. Next, there's a 12-piece, star-studded acting ensemble, shining forth in outstanding whole-group work and magnificent solos. Finally, there's direction by Melina Neal (read bold, life-loving and colorful).

Other fine features of *Leader of the Pack*: a five-piece instrumental group on-stage, under the certain direction of the same Rich Gray. Also, in that group of musicians, there's hot-fingered Johnathan Mansfield at the ivories. Then there's the Mainstay, the always-there Jim Roberts in charge of the set this time and holding up the general production end.

Add to all this the pulse of early '60s music, the pizzazz of an '80s reinterpretation of that scene, and the yield is the very best of musical theater, with the emphasis heavy on musical.

It's also the culmination of much grooming and building of a repertory group. After all those nights of hoofin' it and singin' it out at big-hearted Seymour's Restaurant, Jim Roberts and his cohorts have fine-honed a bunch of serious, dedicated and highly talented performers and technicians, and along the way have attracted some of the hottest local theater talent.

Mainstage's joy of theater, music and performing are evident throughout all aspects of the production, and just one example is how the musical uses hand language in imitation of the back-up trios in '60s black/Motown groups. Such hand movements have been parodied or copied so many times, and usually disastrously so. Even the most talented originals, like the Temptations and the Supremes, didn't look all that great going through these motions. But at the same time it was fun to



Leader of the Pack is Mainstage's current musical theatre production at the Hult Center.

do, and fun to mimic and see. Rather than it being just a flourish, though, Mainstage players do their hand/body moves to the music with grace, finesse and sparkling exuberance. Their downright enjoyment of this, and every aspect of *Leader of the Pack*, is infectious and thrilling.

Vocals could really let go and fill that Soreng Theater, a modernized classically black-box theater. Female vocals were at super-pitch, with Lynne Rothrock and Maureen Robeson stimulating the greatest number of goosebumps.

As for the main players, Trisha A. Will brings her considerable abilities forcefully into a strong characterization of the rock song writer Ellie Greenwich, the stuff of whose life gave rise to wonder-

ful lyrics and to the play. Will handles center stage beautifully and brought us to our knees Saturday night in her solo number.

At the end of this number, a silence ensued. The amount of milliseconds allowed for this pause was exactly the amount necessary for maximum effect. The next number, "Strictly Confidential," was intensified by the pause. Mainstage has refined a wonderful sense of timing and knows just how to pull an audience's strings.

But back to the players. Rich Gray also plays Greenwich's sometime husband, Jeff Barry. His role improved as the evening progressed and his confidence could bloom, and he was his usual treat. The young studs on parade musical number—of four men plus him, all be-muscled and be-tight-jeaned—was

delightfully cocky. Other performer highlights: Danny Bruno, back in town from the temptations of Ashland last summer, portrays Gus Sharkey, Greenwich's manager, and is always worth looking at when on-stage. Andrew DeRycke was surprising for how well he could hoof it, quite a contrast from his staid persona in ORT's *The Betrayal* last winter.

Leader of the Pack has appeal for all ages. It would be especially appropriate for those who lived in those times to take their teenagers to. There's much in common enjoyment for both generations. It's the first the play has been produced on the West Coast—right here in downtown Eugene.

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