

Polly Baker and
Austin Lawrence in
Crazy For You

Last Exit to Junction City

Phoinix Players Go Crazy for Gershwin

Once upon a time, U.S. Route 99 was the principal highway running up and down the West Coast. Shoved aside in the 1960s by the multi-lane monstrosity of I-5, old 99 is now an atavistic arterial, just a rusty zipper that catches and snags at every podunk town. It's convenient to dismiss these municipalities as mere speed bumps, but don't — cultural wonders regularly hide around the corner from that pale yellow spotlight in your path. Junction City, out Hwy 99 just a few clicks from Eugene, is presently home to one such wonder.

Continuing through July 30 at the Star Theater, *Crazy For You* — a "new" Gershwin musical, with a book by Ken Ludwig — is an inspired, ingenious example of what grassroots theater groups across the country can and should be doing to survive and prosper, especially in these tricky economic times. This delicious romp of a production is being mounted by the Phoinix Players (no, that's not a typo), a troupe of very talented, very hard-working actors ranging in age from mid-teens to early 20s.

Culled in part from the tatters of Junction City's high school drama department after it was axed a few years back, Phoinix is composed of actors just hitting their stride. Many of them are students from UO, OSU, LCC and as far away as Seattle, and all prove themselves dedicated to the gritty, DIY essentials of community theater: focus, fundraising, long hours, sustained intensity and grit.

None of which is to say these young players are at all lacking chops; rather, the raw, infectious talent on display in *Crazy For You* is burnished by a sense of faith and purpose that is altogether rare and absolutely badass to behold.

Crazy For You, a 1992 revision of *Girl Crazy* that is classic screwball comedy in the Tin Pan tradition, would prove a challenging production given any level of means and ambition, but for a small community theater of young actors it seems an insurmountable sump of energy and funds. Lavish and rollicking, with a large cast requiring sharp, balanced choreography, this fine piece of they-don't-make-'em-like-that-anymore is big, big, big. The numbers, like "Someone to Watch Over Me," are deal breakers. There's tap, dance, pratfall, innuendo. Botch it and you've got a fiasco on your hands — a Gersh-won't.

The Phoinix Players, led by seemingly inexhaustibly motivated director Mary Huls, put their production together in less than four weeks. What's more, they turned it into dinner theater, with the cast serving pizza and drinks, and dessert at intermission. And, no, this is not a set-up for a punch line; the show is tops, with moments of brilliant innovation and performances that are solid along the line, and some that are great. Because of the play's demands, there are actually two entirely different casts, A and B, performing on successive nights.

The night I attended, it was B's turn to hit the stage. From the moment of being seated to the actors' final bow, the experience was at once intimate and engaging, and completely fun (Gershwin is nothing if not fun, in the best sense of the word). The minimalist set, switching between struggling theaters in New York and Nevada, is wonderfully immersive; the dance numbers are incisively and cleverly thought-out; the acoustics, which aren't fantastic, somehow lend themselves to the musical's creaky, heartfelt currents of artistic idealism and unabashed romance.

Perhaps most impressive, however, was the balance of power (for lack of a better term) achieved by the cast itself. Thanks in large part to the expert direction of Huls, who regularly rotates strong roles among her many actors (a lead in one production, she told me, might be a bit player in the next), there existed a distinct sense of, well, community, which translated on stage to chemistry and equilibrium. Teamwork.

That said, a handful of performances really stood out. As Polly Baker, the tough, small-town girl swept off her feet by the New York cool of aspiring dancer Bobby Child (the fine Austin Lawrence), actor Amanda Bauer was riveting; she has the sly comic timing of Jean Arthur and a singing voice that sends chills. Also noteworthy, though hardly exclusively so, were Jonathan Kemp as the loutish director Bela Zangler, Alexander Bauer as Moose/Wyatt, and Megan Holderby as Patricia Fodor/Suzy. Wish I had space to praise them all.

Now I've only to see cast A perform, which I will do. Stuff this good doesn't come along often enough. **EW**

Crazy For You plays 6 pm Thursday, Friday & Saturday through July 30 at Star Theatre, 898 Juniper St., Junction City; for tickets and information, call 998-3862.

HARVEST MOON PHOTOGRAPHY

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