



These cowgirls go to heaven

One Trick Pony

Cowgirl Heaven gallops smiling into the sunset

Rodeo. Where hundreds, if not thousands, gather to watch half-mad people try to ride ornery bulls and rope cattle and witness dazzling displays of acrobatic horse riding. Where a rider could be mortally wounded in a split second. Where a brief, subtle mistake could be the difference between being crowned rodeo champion and having all of your bones broken. Where not too long ago a group of brave, half-mad women won fame and glory, the inspiration for *Cowgirl Heaven*.

The play is a work of historical fiction. The characters are based on real-life cowgirls that traveled with a rodeo in the Roaring Twenties. The lobby of the Very Little Theatre has several pictures of the original cowgirls performing in Pendleton.

The story begins with four women meeting before a job interview for an all-girl rodeo, and all of the standard archetypes are present. There is the naïve, inexperienced Laramie Tiller (Ecaterina Lynn) who is eager to learn how to do rodeo

tricks. There is Amarillo Rose (Hannah Quigg), the plucky young sweetheart turned bronc-riding extraordinaire. There is the surly, lonely divorcee Minx (Penta Swanson), who belts out folksy one-liners with a languorous Southern drawl.

And then there is the illiterate, brash, superstitious, violent Paddy Irish-er Maude Mahoney, played with a very thick accent by Katie Peters. The Irish are said to be the only ethnic group that's fair game, and this caricature is a boon to this particular comedy. Mahoney's accent is a welcome reprieve from the southern drawl of her fellow cowgirls, and Peters does a marvelous job of maintaining it even while singing.

The fifth and final member of the rodeo troupe is Chaps Purcell (Jessi Cotter), the ambitious leader who, for better or worse, nudges the others into trying riskier feats when they aren't busy popping out babies. The group's dream is to perform at Madison Square Garden.

The play is executed inside Stage Left, the smaller of VLT's two theaters, which makes for an interesting experience. You are close enough to practically touch the performers and, as director Reva Kaufman stated before the play began, "You just might end up with a cowgirl in your lap if you don't watch your feet."

There is a nice balance between frenetic physical comedy and slower, more somber scenes in Kaufman's direction. The minimal use of props, simple costumes and bare-bones set design keeps the focus on the performers.

Prior to the show, the audience was informed that *Cowgirl Heaven* was one of the most active, exciting and hilarious plays to be performed at the theater, and that we would be entertained throughout the entire production.

And she was right, for the most part.

Cowgirl Heaven opens with a series of funny, light-hearted jokes and songs. A palpable sense of energy and excitement hung about the theater. And then it went on. And on. I found myself checking the playbill to make sure they weren't singing the same song over and over. A throwaway line about Clark Gable got the biggest laugh of Act Two.

It wasn't that the play became boring; more like it never varied from the perky, light-hearted note it begins with, even when the group is fighting, arguing and breaking up. Minx's "I Walk Alone" is the only song that finds a different note.

Cowgirl Heaven is a funny story — make no mistake about that — about a group of women banding together to do something decidedly unladylike. Opening with a bang, the play ends with the successful women longing for a return to the old days. Much had changed since they were barely scraping to get by, trying to achieve the seemingly impossible dream of Madison Square Garden, but the tone of the play hadn't. *Cowgirl Heaven* rides that upbeat, perky note into the sunset. **CW**

Cowgirl Heaven plays through Aug. 28 at Very Little Theatre, 2350 Hilyard St., \$10; info at www.thevlt.com or call 541-344-7751.

From Bananas to Zombies

Already, by 7:30 sharp, there are seven people signed up to perform. All-inclusive theatre group No Shame Eugene has opened the door for its monthly Friday night show, and literally anything can happen on the stage this night.

At the deadline half an hour later, there are 13 groups signed up for a five-minute performing slot. A little short of the usual 15, but numbers aren't really the point. "It's supposed to be an open forum," says No Shame coordinator Jacob Boyd. "It's a community."

The Aug. 5 show kicks off with local musician Ted Czuk, who plays folksy tunes for an attentive crowd. No Shame performs the first Friday of every month in the downtown Atrium building, in front of an audience seated in chairs hauled in from a nearby conference room. Despite the makeshift surroundings, the feeling of being in a theatre isn't hard to conjure.

The family-friendly acts were heavy on monologues, which made up four out of the nine acts. But the soliloquies were broken up by performance pieces like that by first-timer Janet Snyder, who read her poem "Just Fly Me." Martin the Mime's bit, "Just A Little Nip," accompanied by the music of Billie Holiday, was just plain adorable.

When the *Jaws* theme sounded, the more risqué acts hit the boards. As the title character in "Ask A Viking," Jesse Wells earned the most laughs for his R-rated answers to audience-written questions. "Apocalyptic Zombie Pranksters" wrapped things up with the epic line, "Screw you guys, I hate this apocalypse!"

The atmosphere after the show was light and friendly. The night was still young. And there's nothing like watching a skit about insane gas attendants to really loosen a person up. — Brit McGinnis

No Shame performs the first Friday of every month at 8 pm at the downtown Atrium Building, 99 W. 10th Ave.; info at www.facebook.com/noshameeugene

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