



TAKE A HIT OF REEFER MADNESS: THE MUSICAL

The hysterical anti-marijuana hysteria of the ACE

I don't much care for pot. In theory, marijuana strikes me as an ideal recreational drug, a mellow, groovy high that is nowhere near as murderous as alcohol or aggrandizing as cocaine — not to mention that, unlike junk, it would take an almost Herculean effort to get addicted to the weed. That said, it's really too bad that whenever I huff bud I wind up feeling like Woody Allen on pig's feet and strychnine, fretting that I didn't wipe good enough and convinced I've come down with lupus.

Because of this, it seems to me I'd make the perfect decriminalization advocate: a non-user who nonetheless, and for thoroughly practical reasons, believes the current state of prohibition against marijuana to be a ridiculous pretext for beefing up the police state, padding the pockets of government bureaucrats and cracking down on basic human rights and freedom. Smoke 'em if you got 'em, I say, and if you really want to cap a hot cherry on that giggle-stick, get thine high self to Actors Cabaret of Eugene's current production of *Reefer Madness: The Musical*; this sly, sexy and expertly conceived stagework

is to drug hysteria what *A Modest Proposal* was to Irish poverty, though where Swift was stark and pissed off, *Reefer Madness* remains off-beat and riotously funny.

Adapted for the stage from the outrageous 1936 exploitation film, now a certifiable stoner cult classic, *Reefer Madness* centers on the tragic tale of star-crossed sweethearts Jimmy Harper (Trevor Eichhorn) and Mary Lane (Sophie Mitchell), a pair of dewy eyed high schoolers possessed of an almost effervescent innocence; they are fresh young life incarnate. Enter Jack Stone (Jordan Nowotny), an unctuously charming snake whose poisons of choice include dealing joints of "muggle" and abusing his strung-out girlfriend Mae Coleman (Megan Hammon). When naive Jimmy happens into Jack's seedy lair, seeking swing lessons, the hood sics on him the slatternly Sally (Monique Morgan), who seduces him to take a toke of the wacky stuff. Talk about "gateway" drugs: From here, Jimmy's collapse includes such high caliber crimes as grand theft auto, vehicular homicide and back-talking Jesus himself.

Keenly directed by Joe Zingo, with sophisticated musical direction by Mark Van Beever (who also excels as the menacing pothead dunce Ralph), *Reefer Madness* is an unqualified triumph for ACE — the material couldn't be more well-suited to this homespun troupe's edgy political and aesthetic sensibilities, and they sink their collective teeth into it like hippies into a hash-brownie sundae. Whether joined in an ensemble musical number like the schlock-creepy title song, which channels the B-movie glory of old Hammer horror flicks, or staging the over determined faux-nostalgia of a sock hop at "the Ol' Five and Dime," the young cast is superb; they prove astonishingly conversant in the ways of vaudevillian comedy and Broadway dance. None of the actors should go unheralded, but I would be particularly remiss here if I didn't mention the leads in particular. Mitchell, who was so stunning in *Spring Awakening*, may be our finest local actor; she has a strong, versatile voice, she's got chops galore and she exudes charm and charisma. Eichhorn is no less accomplished, especially in our era's most undervalued quality: He's a first-rate physical comedian. Watching Eichhorn's gee-willikers turn as Jimmy brought to mind both the lanky, loose-limbed grace of a young Jimmy Stewart and the razzle-dazzle shine of the dancing James Cagney (or, more recently, stars like Justin Timberlake and Joseph Gordon-Levitt).

Fine moments and scenes of surpassing hilarity are too numerous to mention here (where else will you find "taste so great" with "transubstantiate?"), and besides, far be it from me to spoil the many surprises and shocks of joy awaiting unsuspecting audiences. Let it be said, simply, that the sound, tone, choreography and atmosphere of this musical — which ranges from unreconstructed pulp noir and Monty Python-esque gothic to '50s agitprop and a kind of David Lynch-meets-Busby Berkeley extravagance — are never less than engaging, joyously so, and it's a hard, puritanical heart that won't warm to the goosing politics that always lurk just below the surface. There is method to this madness: *Reefer Madness* ekes out the insipid and iniquitous fears that fuel anti-marijuana hysteria — typically the same anti-youth, anti-sex, counter-revolutionary puritanical repression that also bolster abstinence campaigns and book burnings — and it does so with wit, wisdom and a very healthy dose of parody.

Because let's face it: In this election season, as with all vital (and typically depressing) political matters, laughter remains the best medicine. Get a hit of *Reefer Madness*, and let your despair go up in smoke for a night. ■

Reefer Madness: The Musical through Nov. 10 at Actors Cabaret of Eugene, 996 Willamette; ActorsCabaret.org or 683-4368.

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