



GREASE IS (STILL) THE WORD

Phoinix Players bring '50s musical to the boards

Steeped in nostalgia and soaked in the nicest kind of naughty, the hit musical *Grease* has become a cultural artifact of the first order. The songs are a peach. The dialogue is funny, sexy and harmlessly rebellious (the original 1971 version, which was reputedly vulgar and pretty gnarly, has been watered down), and the book — the simplest of boy-meets-girl, boy-loses-girl, boy-gets-girl stories, set in 1959 — gives it a lean, sleek structure. The movie adaptation, which included new songs, introduced a generation of hormonal teenagers to the pleasures of John Travolta in tight pants and Olivia Newton John going pink lady. Almost every girlfriend I've ever had has been hopelessly devoted to the bad-girl snarl of Rizzo.

The Phoinix Players' current production of Jim Jacobs and Warren Casey's high-school musical, which follows the 2007 revival version, is a risky proposition. The show as it's popularly known is all big ensemble numbers, '50s sock-hop routines and relentless rockabilly flash, calling for the sort of glitzy Broadway production reserved, mostly, for larger urban venues. But Red Cane Theatre, where Phoinix works its stuff, is a converted Asian grocery store where a grassroots, D.I.Y. ethic resides, and the troupe — including director Mary Hulls and crew, and a clutch of young actors barely old enough to drink hootch — do all the heavy lifting, building sets and choreographing themselves, even serving popcorn at intermission. Their shows are raw and unamplified. How, then, to give *Grease* the sort of lightning it requires? Especially when, as Hulls confessed, the show was mounted in less than two weeks?

The answer came opening night, when the cast hit the mostly bare, black stage with the musical's boisterous theme song. Their nerves were evident, but so was their nerve; what the first half of the production lacked in boom it more than made up for in balls, as the actors' confidence grew exponentially with each successive number. By the time Lizz Torrecillas, as Rizzo, took her solo with "Look at Me, I'm Sandra Dee," the chills were multiplying. *Grease* was a well-oiled machine, full of flash and flair. Everyone, audience included, was having fun.

A few standouts, then, among a cast that more than held its own. Of course, it's always a pleasure to watch the young married couple, Amanda and Austin Laurence, take the lead in a show, and here their chemistry is evident, especially when Austin, as Danny, pitches a bit of woo with "Sandy." Austin Burden, as Roger (aka "Rump"), is a welcome return after an absence from the Phoinix Players, and the rest of the cast could take some cues from this actor's ability to project his voice into the furthest reaches of Red Cane. Elise Newell is hilarious in the dual roles of Frenchy and Cha Cha DiGregorio. And Alexander Bauer is a study in charming, rosy-cheeked condemnation when, as Teen Angel, he serenades Frenchy with "Beauty School Dropout." It's a bravura performance, and it's one of the highlights of the show, as is Austin Laurence's crooning of "Alone at the Drive-in Movie."

A good portion of the charm of this production of *Grease* resides in its limitations, oddly enough. For anyone expecting to be wowed by a raucous, by-the-numbers remounting of a familiar classic, Phoinix Players' adaptation might be a surprise, though perhaps a welcome one. By keeping the show simple and streamlined, they capture a bit of the unreconstructed vim, whim and unbridled emotionalism of teenage outcasts, while still participating in the euphoric recall of the beloved original. The show has heart and soul. It takes aim at the shooby-doo and shangalanga ding-dong of simple pleasures and happy endings, and it hits the mark. ■

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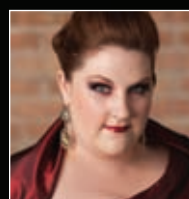
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