

Running on Half-Empty: "Pump Boys & Dinettes" at the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse

Written by Mike Schulz

Tuesday, 09 August 2005 18:00

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The Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse enjoys a luxury that no other theatrical venues in the area do: Its productions, on average, run about eight weeks each, allowing good shows plenty of time to eventually become very, very good shows. Given this, I'm guessing that the theatre's latest offering, *Pump Boys & Dinettes*, will, by its closing night on September 17, end up ... fine.

Friday's opening-night performance certainly *started well*. *Pump Boys* – light on plot but full of charm – features two waitresses and four service-station attendants who sing and share stories about their jobs and love lives, and the show opens with the great, low-key rock number "Highway 57." With Dinettes Rhetta (Nicole Winter) and Prudie (Kim Furness) providing back-up, the Pump Boys – Jim (Blake Braswell), L.M. (Kurtis W. Overby), Jackson (Andrew R. Crowe), and Eddie (Dustin Busch) – perform this introductory routine with laid-back confidence, and the sextet's harmonies are wonderful; within the first five minutes, "Highway 57" establishes both the vocal strength of its performers and the warm, easygoing appeal of

Pump Boys

itself. (It also makes clear the musical talents of the production's men, who, throughout the show, will each play a wide variety of instruments – guitar, piano, drums, violin – and play them *well*

.) And the scene is capped with a great visual reveal by director Chet Deter, when the set's neon signs – barely noticeable before – are lit one after another in a dazzling display of color. The effect is like watching truck-stop fireworks, and it's a kick.

There's only one problem with that opening number. As nicely as it's being performed, no one on the *Pump Boys* stage is connecting with anyone *else* on-stage. I felt that I was seeing six solo performances instead of one group effort, and as the show progressed, this turned out not to be an aberration. By evening's end, the characters barely seem to have been *introduced*

to one another, and without any sense of interaction between the Pump Boys and the Dinettes, their show just limps from one musical routine to the next with little variety and no momentum. It's a show of moments – admittedly, some

great

moments – but never a cohesive whole.

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This is partly the fault of the staging. With the set divided between the diner stage left and the gas station stage right, it isn't made clear when performers can and can't see one another. At times their locales are made to seem "real," and at others, characters meander between the two playing areas; there's no rhyme or reason to when the characters are speaking with one another and speaking with *us*, and it makes those on-stage, and the show itself, look unfocused.

But *Pump Boys*' biggest failing is a lack of conviction on the part of the performers. Since the expansive set generally keeps the actors far away from one another, you rarely see the others' reactions when one performs a solo, yet when you *do*, their blank expressions reveal nothing; I don't recall witnessing one spontaneous look or smile between the cast members all night. Unless the characters' affection for one another is clear to the audience, what affection can we have for *them*?

Kim Furness stands as the exception. As Ghostlight's *The Will Rogers Follies* and Circa '21's *The King & I* proved, Furness' talents are never in doubt, but she's continually, delightfully surprising as a comedienne. Here, she's larger-than-life yet very specific, in that Furness' line readings and vocal tone suggest the bitter, world-weary ironist lurking beneath Prudie's dim-bulb exterior. (The throwaway wit with which she tosses off the word "imbreds" is the evening's biggest howl.)

It's spectacular work, or at least it *would* be if the others gave their roles similar consideration and gave Furness someone to play off *of*. But while many of their vocal performances are fabulous – Winter's "Be Good or Be Gone" and Overby's "Serve Yourself" especially – the other performers aren't very distinctive; they come alive for their moment in the spotlight and promptly recede when that moment passes. (As actors, they're terrific musicians.) Perhaps, weeks down the road, Circa '21's latest ensemble will mesh as a team and start having more fun together. But as of now, *Pump Boys & Dinettes* is missing what it desperately needs – that exhilaration you feel when a group of individual talents unite as one unstoppable whole.