

Written by Mike Schulz

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On Thursday, I attended the Timber Lake Playhouse musical *The Spitfire Grill*, and caught another presentation of the piece – this time at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre – the very next night. I'm actually somewhat disappointed that no additional area venues staged the show over the weekend, because even after two outstanding *Spitfire Grill* s in a row, I would've happily made time for more.

It's generally agreed that there are only two reasons for a song to exist in a traditional book musical: to reveal character or to further the plot. Among the many thrills of composer James Valcq's and lyricist Fred Alley's *Spitfire Grill*, its biggest may be that every single number seems to do both at once. You don't feel at all restless during the musical interludes here, partly because the score is so varied and tuneful, but mostly because you're always *learning* something during them; zoning out on the songs would mean missing storyline nuggets and personality insight that you wouldn't get, and wouldn't necessarily *want*, any other way. (First produced in 2001, the show is based on a 1996 movie, and touching and spiky though it is, the film doesn't boast the rhapsodic grace, or huge laughs, of Valcq's and Alley's achievement.)

*The Spitfire Grill*, however, also underlines the enormous pleasures of a strong narrative. Its

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setup is simple: Just released from prison, Percy Talbott – a native West Virginian in her early 20s – takes residence in the sleepy burg of Gilead, Wisconsin, is given a room and job at the town's lone eatery, and becomes instrumental in changing the lives of her steely but fair-minded employer Hannah, and her good-natured but browbeaten co-worker Shelby. Much of the story is devoted to the raffling off of Hannah's rustic establishment after 10 unsuccessful years on the market, and there's really little suspense about how the write-an-essay-and-win-a-diner plotline will resolve itself. Yet a story doesn't have to be surprising to be effective, and

*The Spitfire Grill*

's is

*fantastically*

effective, precisely because of the glorious empathy that Valcq and Alley (also the show's book writers) have for their characters.



You can easily guess the musical's ending – and the resolutions to numerous subplots – well before intermission, but that doesn't mean its narrative is a yawn. Due to the authors' wonderfully humane, openhearted acceptance of its complexly rendered Gilead residents (even Shelby's husband Caleb, the closest thing the show has to a villain), you're actually incredibly invested in the outcomes here. You *want* Percy, at long last, to find peace (perhaps with Gilead's friendly sheriff, Joe Sutter), and Hannah to relieve herself of her apparent, unspecified guilt, and Shelby to stand up to her domineering spouse. And you want to know how these inevitabilities will occur.

*The Spitfire Grill* is that rarest

of modern musicals – a legitimately

*sincere*

production – and so its laughter, tears (and you'll shed them), and deep rooting interest feel spectacularly well-earned.

At least they are in presentations as across-the-board excellent as those at Timber Lake and Richmond Hill, and you're even knocked out at the former before it starts, because Timber Lake designer Nathan Dahlkemper's set – with an evocative growth of leafless trees surrounding the titular grill – is a miracle of finely detailed *mise-en-scène*. Looking every bit the 50-year-old edifice it's described as, with the back porch's flimsy screen door an especially nice touch, Dahlkemper's tchotchke-laden playing area feels lived-in and full of character (it practically

*is* a character), which makes it a perfect match for director Matthew Teague Miller's exquisite septet of performers.

# Now We're Cookin'!: "The Spitfire Grill," at the Timber Lake Playhouse and the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre

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