

Printed in the 09/22/08 edition of the Herald Journal:

Cast sparkles in Pickleville's 'Plaid'

By Bruce Ackerman

For the second time in less than a year, the Pickleville Players, famous for their summer-long musicals and melodramas, have descended from their place on the bonnie bonnie banks of the great Bear Lake to entertain Cache Valleyites a little closer to home. The company is currently presenting "Forever Plaid," Stuart Ross' delightful four-man musical comedy revue, at the Eccles Conference Center on the Utah State University campus, weekends through Oct. 6.

Director Andrea Davis and her cast of seasoned songsters bring to the stage a laugh-a-minute production that sizzles with hot vocals, familiar melodies, crisp choreography and fast-paced comedic flare. Basically, it's an end-to-end, ear-to-ear cheer fest.

"Forever Plaid" is a plot-thin play about a 1950's "boy-band" (e.g. The Four Aces/Freshmen) who meet their untimely demise while on the way to pick up new plaid tuxedos for their first "major" engagement ... when their car collides with a bus-load of Catholic teens en route to the Ed Sullivan show ... where the Beatles are about to make their American debut. (Breath.) The four singers are instantly transported to Limbo or some such other-worldly domain from which they have somehow been allowed to return, decades later, to play the gig they never quite scored in life. We in the audience are blessed to witness this cosmic miracle.

And it is something of a wonder to behold. Singer-actors Shayne Taylor, Kevin Jones, Cory Keate and T.J. Tavis bring "The Plaids" to life, lighting up the firmament (well, at least the Eccles Conference Center stage) with the innocence, wonder and heavenly joy of a harmony quartet getting a second shot at their dreamcome-true. With harmonies as tight as a spandex Speedo on an Olympic swimmer, the foursome splashes out number after show-stopping, side-splitting number in a veritable tidal wave of Grated musical fun.

Tunes like "Gotta Be This or That," "Crazy 'Bout Ya Baby," "Chain Gang," "Catch a Falling Star" and close to a dozen other '50s favorites come to life in ways you'll remember "forever" thanks to the sweetest of vocal arrangements by James Raitt, stellar music direction by Derek Furch, clever staging and crisp choreography by Andrea Davis and Sharli King and, of course, the considerable skills of the singers themselves. The vocal ensemble is backed by an equally bodacious instrumental trio featuring Nicole Anderson at the piano, Robyn Peterson on the drums and bassist Ryan Heidt.

Between songs, the players banter with each other and the audience, revealing endearing, distinctive characters in an idyllic look back at the age of innocence. Shayne Taylor, as Franky, is sort of the straight man of the group; part cheerleader and part road manager, Taylor, has the sometimes daunting task of keeping his quirky bandmates on task. He is earnest and believable in his role.

Cory Keate sparkles as Sparky, the flirtatious and unflappable extrovert of the group. Keate brings a mischievous charm to his role and a winning smile that one can only imagine earns him the adoration of every eligible bachelorette in the audience. His rendition of "No, Not Much" is especially entertaining and his vocals are stellar throughout.

Kevin Jones, as Jinx, has an engaging Tommy Smothers, deer-in-the-headlights quality as the higher-strung, nosebleed-prone, most-timid Plaid. But he breaks his mold and lays it all out there to audience cheers in at least one show-stopping number.

Smudge, played by T.J. Davis, is a little harder to "type," suggesting a potential lack of deliberate choices for his character, who is sometimes shy and vulnerable and at others downright flamboyant – but always likable and fun.

Each of the singers has a moment (or a few) in the spotlight. All of them shine, but none more brightly than Davis, who again showcases his incredible range and vocal dexterity from the deep, bass-driven "I Owe My Soul to the Company Store" to the belt-it-out strains of "Rags to Riches." This kid can flat-out sing!

Colorful costumes by Lois Hugie and Andrea Davis, outstanding audio mixing and lighting by Kenneth Bell and his team, and overall solid production values round out this production to make it a no-holds-barred winner with plenty of professional polish and popular appeal.

The 50-plus crowd will get special pleasure from the nostalgic stroll down memory lane, but this is a winning formula for musiclovers and live entertainment aficionados of every age and stripe. With barely a discernible flaw, Pickleville's "Forever Plaid" is an easy 4.5 claps out of 5 on the Herald Journal applause meter. Ah, what the heck ... make it a perfect 5. Just don't miss it!

"Forever Plaid" continues weekends through Oct. 6 at the Eccles Conference Center Auditorium at USU. An optional buffet dinner catered by The Copper Mill Restaurant is also available. Patrons can call the Pickleville Playhouse Box Office at 435-755-0968 for tickets and more information.

Theater critic Bruce Ackerman is a graduate of the Utah State University Theatre Department. He currently works as a writer and an actor. He lives in Providence. He is among a number of freelance writers whose columns appear in The Herald Journal as part of an effort to expose readers to a variety of community voices. He is not an employee of the newspaper.