

A musical that is more about humor than music

Forever Plaid is an odd little musical. It's also a rather perverse one, given that musicals usually attempt to appeal to people who like music.

Written by Stuart Ross, the show gives viewers a chance to acquaint themselves with nearly 30 songs that were popular before the Beatles made their mark on American music. But as often as not, the song renditions are muddled by weak attempts at humor.

The plot is thin but ingenious, consisting mostly of events that transpired before the show begins.

It centers on four friends who met in high school in 1956 and formed a quartet called Forever Plaid. Eight years later, they had just landed a semi-big gig when tragedy struck.

The four were on their way to pick up their new plaid tuxedos when their car was struck broadside by a busload of Catholic teenagers. Ironically, the teens were going to see the Beatles appear on *The Ed Sullivan Show*—a performance that would dry up the market for the kind of music the Plaids played.

The Plaids would never know this, as they didn't survive the crash. As the musical opens, however, they find themselves mysteriously returned to a semblance of existence. Somehow they understand that they've been given one more chance to perform the perfect concert that eluded them in real life.

While this sounds like a setup for a wistful nostalgia trip, both productions of *Forever Plaid* I've seen put more emphasis on the humor. That's no surprise in the case of the current Otterbein production, which is directed by David Caldwell.

Whether he's onstage or behind the scenes, the Equity performer generally favors humor over emotion. And he's in both places in this show.

Caldwell plays quartet member Smudge. Though he looks out of place, being a generation or so older than the other actors, he sings well enough to fit in vocally.

The other quartet members—Frankie, Sparky and Jinx—are given likable portrayals by Daniel Everidge, Rusty Harding and John-Philp Bowen, respectively.

One weakness of this production is that the four characters have interchangeable personalities, the most obvious distinction being that Jinx gets nosebleeds when he's nervous.

Theater

RICHARD ADES



with the best voice. This becomes apparent when he gives it free rein on the Ray Charles song "Cry."

But the actors all sound pretty good singing, especially when they're harmonizing. That makes it all the more disappointing when their decent voices and the great songs they're performing are made subservient to silly jokes and sight gags.

Whether they're doing the songs straight or cockeyed, at least the performers get



They should've called themselves the B Sharps: *From Forever Plaid*

good accompaniment from pianist Eileen Huston and stand-up bass player Eric Van Wagner. The set is equally impressive, being a sparkly mixture of class and kitsch designed by Rob Johnson.

So if you're a fan of such golden oldies as "Moments to Remember," "Three Coins in the Fountain" and "Love Is a Many Splendored Thing," you may find *Forever Plaid* worthwhile. Just keep your fingers crossed that the songs you like the best are performed between the comedy routines, not as part of them.

INFO:

Otterbein Summer Theatre will present *Forever Plaid* through July 25 at the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St. in Westerville. Showtimes are 8 p.m. Wednesdays-Saturdays and 2 p.m. Sundays. Running time: 1 hour, 30 minutes. Tickets are \$22. 823-1109.

THEATER REVIEW | FOREVER PLAID

Otterbein's musical comedy provides a pleasant piece of nostalgia

by Margaret Quamme

OR THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Forever Plaid is a wispy little musical that could wallow in slapstick or sink in seriousness.

Otterbein Summer Theatre's production finds a nice balance between the two, resulting in an evening of effortless laughter.

The one-act takes off from the premise that in 1964 a quartet of innocent and sweetly harmonizing young men, en route to pick up plaid tuxedos for their first big gig, are killed when a school bus full of teenagers on the way to see the Beatles on *The Ed Sullivan Show* runs into their car.

Miraculously, they're brought

► Otterbein Summer Theatre will present *Forever Plaid* at 8 tonight and 2 p.m. Sunday, 8 p.m. Wednesday through next Saturday, 2 p.m. July 18, 8 p.m. July 21-24 and 2 p.m. July 25 in the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St., Westerville. Tickets cost \$22. Call 614-823-1109.

back to life in 2004, just long enough to perform the show they were intending to put on at the Airport Hilton lounge.

Backed up by a deadpan, beret-sporting string-bass player (Eric Van Wagner) and a haughty pianist (Eileen Huston) — "She came with the room," the Plaids explain — the quartet swings through its thoroughly

choreographed and sweetly awkward numbers.

Highlights include a piece in which the four substitute plumbers' helpers, borrowed from a day job, for microphones and an earnest calypso number in which, while palm trees tenuously rise from the stage, the singers implore audience members to beat their drums and shake their marimbas.

A member of the audience is also hauled in to help perform the classic *Heart and Soul* on piano when the pianist sashays offstage, wine bottle in hand, to take her break. A medley of work songs, including *Sixteen Tons* and *Chain Gang*, reaches the fizzy heights of *A Mighty Wind*.

At Thursday's opening night, the four singers played off one another convincingly, and their voices were strong enough to be pleasing without being overly sophisticated. Daniel Everidge's asthmatic Frankie is youthfully enthusiastic; Rusty Harding's Sparky sweeps across the floor with the flair of someone who has just realized he might be a ladies' man after all, and John-Philip Bowen's Jinx moves credibly in the course of a single song from sad to soulful.

Director David Caldwell, who plays the fourth singer — and who has appeared in "Sanders Family" shows at Otterbein Summer Theatre the past two summers — is, at 39, considera-

bly older than the three others, but he blends into the group flawlessly. His Smudge is a pernickety pleasure, and he effortlessly supports the three students rather than trying to outshine them.

Rob Johnson's playful light design features appropriately glaring, and occasionally misplaced, spotlights, which cause the singers to squint and hustle for their positions, while his scenic design, including a baby-blue backdrop with silvery highlights, fits the era. A hyperactive bubble machine and the world's small-

est disco ball add to the fun.

Stuart Ross' script isn't the strongest: Interludes when the characters sit and talk make one long for more music, and an especially sappy and extended monologue near the end almost brings the show to a screeching halt.

One could also fret that this nostalgic view of the pre-rock sugarcoats any possible problems. But when the boys take center stage to sing *Love*, *Many Splendored Thing* or *The Coins in the Fountain*, complaints dissolve.

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Actor-director understands fabric of 'Plaid'

David Caldwell never tires of participating in lighthearted revues.

The whimsical *Forever Plaid*, opening tonight in an Otterbein Summer Theatre production, is an example.

"The show is popular because it speaks to a simpler era in America, a time of proms, convertibles, soda shops, white buck shoes and letter sweaters," said the actor, also the show's guest director.

The off-Broadway hit focuses on members of a 1960s-style male quartet who return from limbo to present a doo-wop concert.

The play was one of Contemporary American Theatre Company's biggest hits in 1997. It also was staged last month by Senior Repertory of Ohio Theatre Company.

The revue "pokes fun at the 'projector-sector,' the audio-visual-club kids who were the class geeks," Caldwell said.

Otterbein's geeks are Smudge (Caldwell), Francis (Daniel Everidge), Spanky (Rusty Harding) and Jinx (John-Philip Bowen).

"We're four friends from high school who died in 1964 in a car accident," Caldwell said, "and we've come back 40 years later to do the show we were meant to do."

Double duty as a director-actor is difficult because it "splits my focus," he said, but "It's nice to be onstage with the students because it allows them to see



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In the Otterbein Summer Theatre production of *Forever Plaid*, from left: David Caldwell, John-Philip Bowen, Rusty Harding and Daniel Everidge

where the energy should be."

Caldwell, who graduated from Otterbein in 1986, also directed and appeared in the college's *Smoke on the Mountain* (2002) and *Sanders Family Christmas: More Smoke on the Mountain* (2003). He has appeared several times in *Smoke* revivals.

"Like *Smoke on the Mountain*, ... (*Plaid*) is something I enjoy doing, often ended up putting myself into and had a lot of

great times," he said.

Caldwell has directed *Plaid* six times, including the Hawaiian premiere in 1994 at the Hula Hut in Waikiki, and performed in it twice.

All three revues are "put together well, don't talk down to or intimidate the audience" and are "actor-instrument" shows, Caldwell said, in which the actors double as the onstage orchestra.

At Otterbein, Caldwell plays the piano, Bowen plays the accordion and Harding plays the Melodica minikkeyboard.

With *Love Is a Many Splendored Thing*, *Perfidia* and other retro songs, *Plaid* pays homage to guy groups of the early 1960s: the Four Freshmen, the Crewcuts and the Lettermen.

"It celebrates the last music that parents and children enjoyed together before rock 'n'

roll split the Top 40 radio audience," Caldwell said.

Caldwell, 39, said it's "a little strange" to be so much older than the student actors but added that he still looks pretty much as he did at 20.

The New York-based artist, who directed Otterbein's *The Butter and Egg Man* last year, will return in the fall to Otterbein to direct the musical *Violet*.

Forever Plaid performances will be at 7:30 tonight, 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday — and July 15-25 — in the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St., Westerville. Tickets cost \$22; call 614-823-1109.

Weathervane musical

Weathervane Playhouse is going crazy for Gershwin.

Crazy for You, the tap-dancing update of George and Ira Gershwin's *Girl Crazy*, is in its final week in Newark and still attracting crowds.

Among the Columbus cast members are David Shane, Andrea Shockery, Chris Storer and Dawn Farrell, who plays the supporting role of travel writer Patricia Fodor.

After a 1979 car accident, Farrell had to have her right leg reattached. She recovered and has regained about 85 percent use of her ankle and leg.

"The best part ... is I'm tapping with pros again, despite my handicap," she said, "but I'm told I don't miss a beat."

The run will continue at 8 tonight through Saturday at 100 Price Rd., Newark. Tickets cost \$17 to \$20, or \$15 to \$18 for senior citizens, \$14 to \$18 for students and \$13 for children 12 and younger. Call 740-366-4616.

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ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

I see dead people – and they're singing harmony

By DENNIS THOMPSON

Suburban News Theater Critic

Otterbein Summer Theatre brightens up the mid-summer with *Forever Plaid*, a fun time-traveling musical.

The Stuart Ross work has a simple premise. We're taken back to the early 1960s

– or rather, the early 1960s are brought to us.

Forever Plaid is the name of a singing group formed by four friends who met in the audio-visual club while attending high school in the 1950s. This is an ode to those pre-Beatles days when guys hung out in the basement perfecting four-part harmonies.

We learn that following high school the four held day jobs while trying to land bookings for their group. On the night of their first big break, on their way to a gig at the local airport Hilton lounge, they were killed when their car was broadsided by a busload of Catholic schoolgirls en route to see the Beatles on *The Ed Sullivan Show*.

All this we are told at the beginning. What we see are four youngmen in white dinner jackets tentatively entering Rob Johnson's sparkly, blue-toned re-creation of the airport lounge. The boys have been brought back to the present for the chance to finally give that performance.

What the show is, then, is not a large-cast musical with a story. It's the four guys in concert, bantering with us and each other between numbers.

It's light and fun, with wonderfully melodic and harmonized songs that I must admit I remember.

The actors are Daniel Everidge as Frankie, Rusty Harding as Sparky, John-Philip Bowen as Jinx and guest Equity actor and director David Caldwell as Smudge. By the end of the evening, we have developed a fondness for each of them, lovable quirks and all.

Each has individual moments to shine, such as



REVIEW

Bowen with *Cry*. But it's when they sing in harmony that things really take off.

We're treated to old favorites such as *Love Is a Many Splendored Thing*, *Magic Moments*, *Moments to Remember* and *No, Not Much*. There's a seamless

transition from *Sixteen Tons* to *Chain Gang* and back again, with a bottle of ketchup used for the instrumental accompaniment.

There's comedy in the choreographed song routines, in the songs themselves (like a be-bop '50s version of the Beatles' *She Loves You*), in quick throw-away lines and in manic production numbers. Their three-minute version of *The Ed Sullivan Show* is hilarious.

The boys are accompanied by pianist Eileen Huston and bass player Eric Van Wagner, who become part of the action themselves.

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Postmortem melodies

A little thing like death can't keep a quartet from performing one last concert in *Forever Plaid*, running through Sunday at Otterbein College's Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St. Quartet members are played by (from left): Daniel Everidge, John-Philip Bowen, Rusty Harding and David Caldwell, who also directs the comic musical. Performance times are 8 p.m. today through Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday. Tickets, \$22, can be ordered by calling 614-823-1109.

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