

Slammer spoof delivers salacious punch – Broad humor doesn't drag in campy comedy

Theatre review by John Busbee

If good-natured entertainment and vampish vulgarity were conjoined on stage, the theatrical hybrid would very well be “Cell Block Sirens of 1953.” This show is raw, crude, and, if one comes to this campy comedy knowing this, great fun for adults. Yes, it's not for the under-18 set. With action that would make Mel Brooks blush, “Cell Block Sirens of 1953” parodies the women prison movies of the 1950s. This musical, by Andrew Shoffner & Christopher Willard, has the cult-appeal of “Rocky Horror Picture Show” and delivers a refreshingly different offering to Central Iowa's audiences.

Scenic and sound designer, Thatcher Williams, and lighting designer, Jarrod Bodensteiner, again show a deft touch in transforming the challenging Viking Theatre space into a four-bed, two-level prison setting, complete with cinder block walls and suspended lights reminiscent of an interrogation room. Theatre...for a Change is adapting well to this space, with a commitment to build a resident theatre company working along side the Grand View theatre program. “Cell Block Sirens” should enhance the partnership.

The musical follows the incarceration of ingénue Hope Faith Allen (Kyle “Eric” Lee Chizek – yes, in drag, along with two other actors) into the degenerate world of a women's prison circa the 1950s, complete with sadistic warden, perverse prison doctor, crazy inmates and even an alligator. Director Andréa Markowski keeps the action clipping along with over-the-top antics, groaner bits and very bawdy staging. It's just what the script demands.

Although starting slowly, Chizek quickly warms up to the role of Hope as she transforms from demure to dominating, taking the reins of a prison musical performance that covers the “break out.” Standouts include Barb Martin as the hard-boiled, knife-wielding leader of the cell block, Queenie Smith; Patricia J. Uy-Westlund as the irrepressibly uninhibited Shanghai Mabel; and, Anita Smith as the dominatrix warden, Matron Stella Crumm. Martin belts her songs with power and style, especially her Act II opening number, “Countin' Off Days 1 & 2,” Smith sluttishly struts her soulful stuff in “Belle of the Ball” and Uy-Westlund elicits several groans for grossness from the audience as she quickly establishes herself as a crowd-pleasing con.

The rest of this fine ensemble brings great variety to this gender bent show: dual roles of the Guard/Doctor (played with lecherous and bumbling comedic skill by John Cisar), Pearl Wilbur (played with vulnerable sensitivity by Amanda Banks), dual roles of Gwendolyn Duke-Hutton/Welch (schizophrenically played with delicious attitude by Scott David Cartwright), Schatze Laverne (by Ben Eichner, especially on-target when dead-panning in “Countin' Off Days III”), and Lil (with exceptional stage presence by Ed “Slippery” Wyandott).

With their collective tongue firmly planted in cheek (and, perhaps elsewhere), this production team brings an outrageous level of raucous fun to Greater Des Moines audiences looking for a definitely naughty, laugh-out-loud adventure. “Cell Block Sirens of 1953” plays through May 28 at the Viking Theatre, Grand View College, and must be seen to be believed and sure to evoke several, “Did they really just do what I think they did?” Visit www.theaterforachange.com for complete details.