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SPECIAL TO THE REGISTER
 Shanghai (Patricia J. Uy-Westlund) strikes a blow as Schatze (Ben Eichner) blows a bubble in the comedy musical "Cell Block Sirens of 1953."

If you go

WHEN: Through Sunday
CURTAIN: 7:30 p.m. Wednesday and Thursday, 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 3 p.m. Sunday
WHERE: Grand View College's Viking Theatre, 2811 E. 14th St.
LENGTH: 2 hours
RATING: R for simulated sex, language and profanity
TICKETS: \$10 general admission, \$5 seniors and students



Kooky songs, characters a lock in 'Cell Block'

By JEFFREY BRUNER
 REGISTER THEATER CRITIC

May 22, 2006

Camp productions on the Des Moines stage shift from spaghetti westerns - StageWest's "Johnny Guitar" - to broads behind bars with Theater for a Change's "Cell Block Sirens of 1953."

The women-in-prison movies get a fun send-up that's strong on comedy - the very coarse kind - if not so much on the musical side. If I remember correctly, those movies were never big on songs anyway. Or plot. Or anything.

"Bye Bye Birdie" or "Shawshank Redemption," it ain't.

Kyle Chizek, one of three men in drag, plays the down-on-her-luck orphan Hope Allen, thrown in jail and forced to live in Cell Block Q with Queenie (Barb Martin), Shanghai (Patricia J. Uy-Westlund), Pearl (Amanda Banks), Gwendolyn (Scott David Cartwright) and Schatze (Ben Eichner).

The place is run by Matron Stella Crumm, played with a gleeful cackle by Anita Smith as a cross between Mama Morton and Nurse Ratched. John Cisar plays the lustful prison doctor who loves musicals with an entertaining creepiness.

Hope is bullied around the cellblock before she learns how to stick up for herself and get revenge on the mean Crumm while plotting the mandatory escape. In between, the songs have lyrics such as: "Women should not be caged, it (expletive) their makeup, and makes them enraged."

Not quite the stuff of Broadway blockbusters.

Should "Cell Block" be a musical? Probably not. Creators Andrew Shoffner and Christopher Willard will never be mistaken for Kander and Ebb, and their songs are, for the most part, forgettable. They do deserve credit for "The Teaching Song," a very funny, obscene parody that will never let you think the same way again about "The Sound of Music."

Martin, a veteran of the old Ingersoll Dinner Theater, and Smith both make the most musically of the material they have to work with. Smith's solo number "Belle of the Ball" is good, and Eichner's bass voice is strong in the ensemble numbers and quite funny while performed in drag.

Director Andrea Markowski has done a nice job with casting, and she's gotten the ensemble at ease with the material, which always makes for better camp. Chizek is perfectly absurd as the "cute little number," even if his voice isn't a good fit for Hope's songs. Uy-Westlund is suitably raunchy as Shanghai, the Common Prostitute, and Cartwright is a blast in drag as the mentally unstable socialite Gwendolyn Duke-Hutton in the first act and the uptight prison guard Welch in the second.

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