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'Forever Plaid' an audience pleaser

Theatre Talk

By FRED LIPPINCOTT

The Alabama Shakespeare Festival has refined its musical programs into a predictable revue format. Rather than venturing into musical theater, even in one of its less fully staged forms, the Festival limits itself to shows that are closer to nightclub acts, TV specials or pop concerts.

Case in point is "Forever Plaid", which opened last week and which purports to be the name of a singing group resurrected from the 1960s. The no-frills show takes place on a bare stage, with four male singers accompanied by an on-stage grand piano and bass. Their costumes run the gamut from white Tuxedo jackets to red ones for the last quarter of the show. The men sing sweetly enough, but all in the same vein, accompanied by "satiric" gestures and mannerisms that seem amateur and soon get tiresome.

The group's repertory is taken from ten years of Top Forty hits, all achingly familiar: "Heart and Soul", "Lady of Spain", "Love Is A Many Splendored Thing", "No, No, No", "Mama", "Mama", "Mama", "Three Coins in a Fountain". There's a Mexican number with comic hats, and the group even coaxes a "volunteer" from the audience to help play "Perfidia" on the piano. No one in the cast seems to have worked at ASF before, and the Festival has accustomed us to a higher level of polish.

Yet the audience at the preview I saw loved the show. They applauded each number warmly and rose "as one" at the end to give a standing ovation. Maybe you'll have a good time too.

Alabama Shakespeare Festival usually presents a play about the black experience, with largely black actors, to correspond to Black History Month. Last year, "Nothin' But The Blues" did not originate here, but went on to a successful run in New York. Let's hope the current offering, "A Lesson Before Dying" has a similar extended life, for in my view it's the most successful of the 15 or so black shows I've seen at the Festival.

The play is based on the distinguished 1993 novel by Ernest J. Gaines, as adapted for the stage by Romulus Lin-

ney, in a version commissioned by the Festival. As the program mentions, the novel is "like a play, moving forward in surprising but inevitable scenes", so that much material does not need rewriting. Linney has reduced the number of characters and focused the action on the visits to a young man unjustly condemned to death in rural "Bayonne," Louisiana, in 1948. During the course of his trial, the accused has been called a "hog".

A fourth-grade graduate with no skills, the young man Jefferson (Jamahl Marsh) hasn't a lot going for him — except that he's not guilty — and his self esteem is low. At first his only supporter is the woman who raised him, his "nanan," Miss Emma (brilliant Barbara Meek), who gets her way against the local good ol' boys: (Sheriff Steven Bradbury and Warden Aaron Harpold). It's her idea to have the schoolmaster, Grant Wiggins (Isiah Whitlock Jr.) "teach" Jefferson to die like a man.

"The opera program at Huntingdon College is alive and well — with the emphasis on 'live' — Fred Lippincott

But Grant is very reluctant. Himself a product of the same one-room, plantation school, he is discouraged by his efforts in the past to teach Jefferson and is unsure what direction his own life should take. He dreams of leaving Bayonne with his girl friend Vivian (Melissa Maxwell), and it's part of the magic of the play that both Jefferson and Grant undergo change.

Miss Emma pulls all the strings she can. She tempts Jefferson with her home-cooked meals and fresh laundry, she enlists the schoolmaster and she visits the prison with Reverend Ambrose (Robert Colston) to talk to Jefferson about God. Eventually she succeeds in getting Jefferson to face up to his fate, and he dies unjustly, not having given in to despair. Towards the end, he has written painfully in a notebook. A transcription of his entries is the mov-

ing climax of the novel; on the stage he reads many of the lines.

This fine production, with superior actors and Kent Thompson's sensitive direction, deserves your active support.

Over Christmas I was able to reacquaint myself with the London theater after a ten-year absence. The special treat was finally to see Ben Johnson's "Volpone, or the Fox," one of the greatest plays of Shakespeare's time. The Royal Shakespeare Company worked up a production of the rarely-seen play in Stratford-on-Avon, before bringing it to the Pit at the Barbican Centre in London. Although played at top speed (the play is long), this classic account of a scoundrel who gets his comeuppance was surprisingly easy to follow. Other Johnson plays often have difficult language, which keeps them from being given here.

Another treat was to see an old-fashioned pantomime, a kind of Victorian burlesque (in the original sense) of an opera or play. In this case a 19th century Cinderella, roughly based on the Rossini opera. Authentic versions of this popular entertainment are put on at Christmas at the Actors' Theatre Club on Villiers Street, where the public may buy temporary membership and also eat dinner. Part of "King Lear" has been added on the front of the pantomime, so that the two sisters (played by men) were named Goneril and Regan. The effect was especially funny when a man tried to fit the glass slipper. The panto had a villain, whom we hissed; in this case the brother of the prince, and there was the traditional part of "Buttons," a page. The fairy Godmother is an old music hall "artiste". Although accompanied by piano, the music was specially arranged, with added songs, mostly to traditional, classical tunes — unlike modern pantomime that may have rock music. A delightful evening, and very British.

Other plays I saw in the West End, the equivalent of Broadway, featured Maggie Smith, Helen Mirren, and Donald Sinden, an old character actor who was knighted by the Queen in 1997 — all actors I'd seen before on previous trips.

The opera program at Huntingdon College is alive and See THEATER, page 15

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well — with the emphasis on "live." See an entire Mozart opera, "Cosi Fan Tutte" (That's the Way Women Are), Thursday, Friday, and Saturday at 7:30 and Sunday at 2:30 in the Dungeon Theatre. For home-grown opera to run two weeks in a row is unprecedented, especially with the quality so high. Huntingdon students, recent graduates and faculty are cast together, so that vocal coaches appear along with their proteges. The fast-paced show in English, owes a lot of its energy to Jason Beasley's stylish piano accompaniment, with Christopher Tilley playing continue on the harpsichord.

The Dungeon Theatre is small enough that no singer needs to

force, and everyone can be heard, even the lighter men's voices that mature later than women's ones. George Olsson's candy-box set establishes the right mood, along with Jason Smith's costumes. The cast is headed by Carrie Prewitt and Susan A. Cooper, all the more convincing because of their youthful looks. Once again Dr. James Glass, who also plays Don Alfonso, is the behind-the-scenes producer and musical director. Fiona Macleod directs the stage action. The Baisely Powell Ellebash Opera Theatre, the underwriter, more than got its money's worth as the whole effort is highly professional. Who would have thought that for the third year in a row we would have such fine live opera in Montgomery?



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REVIEW

'Plaid' spurious effort at best

By Allan Swafford
Special to the Advertiser

Is it an illusion or has every third set on the Alabama Shakespeare Festival's stages degenerated into a gathering of musical instruments intended to accompany a performance of yet another spuriously plotted revue of popular music aimed at a segment of audience that does not find nostalgia a revoltingly sentimental emotion?

In the past three or four seasons this would certainly appear to be the case and "Forever Plaid" is a prime case in point.

Its plot — if we may so dignify with that word anything so tenuous as this — is at best unoriginal. The four members of a singing group killed in an accident in 1964 return to earth to work out their dubious potential, to work out, as it were, their own salvation. This is Billy Bigelow in "Carousel." This is the plot gimmick of a recently (and poorly) remade film classic. This echoes the plots of the Topper novel, films and TV show.

But in "Forever Plaid" this plot offers less grist for the mill than in those works it so apes. Here it is merely a gimmick, a hook on which to hang a haphazard assemblage of cretinous-to-bearable, 1950s popular songs calculated to

better than anticipated

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milk the cash cow of nostalgia.

It is even an age-specific gimmick. No one born after the bland and whitebread '50s, no one unfamiliar with such groups as the Four Freshmen or with the Como crooning style or Tennessee Ernie Ford's country pop, will even get the point here — assuming there is a point.

Physically and musically an attempted satire on the insipid, pre-Beatles musical era, the humor runs to predictable sight gags — the out-of-step character, upside-down music on the piano — and the spoof ends up as dull as the era spoofed. The music, curiously, is better sung than it deserves.

And though "Forever Plaid" is indeed a yawn a minute, an occasional, unlabored laugh startles like a gunshot in the night. Equally startling is the music's momentarily rising above the plane of inferiority. Such a moment is the medley of Belafonte-esque Caribbean music — both in choice and performance. As satire, the show peaks in the hysterically funny spoof of the Ed Sullivan Show.

In short, the four energetic performers — Paul Woodson, Daniel Siford, Allie Laurie and Bill Daelin Gross — at moments transform and transcend their material. They will sell banality through the show's run almost as though it were unique — just as they did opening night.

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WANT TO GO?

- **What:** "Forever Plaid"
- **When:** Runs through Feb. 20; showtimes are 7:30 p.m. Sunday, Tuesday through Thursday; 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday; and 2 p.m. Saturday and Sunday
- **Where:** Alabama Shakespeare Festival, in the Blount Cultural Park off Woodmere Boulevard
- **Admission:** \$20-\$30, depending on date; discounts for seniors, military personnel, students and groups of 10 or more
- **Information:** 271-5353