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Review: 'Plaid' keeps harmonies, laughs coming

By Elaine Schmidt, Special to the Journal Sentinel

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Comedy's a funny thing, pun intended. Winning a laugh from a live audience is a curious equation that mixes material, delivery and timing.

The Skylight Opera Theatre production of the new holiday show "Plaid Tidings," a sequel to "Forever Plaid," makes that equation add up to hilarity.

Written by Stuart Ross and directed by Bill Theisen, the show's deliberately thin plot finds the spirits of the Plaids, a pop vocal quartet who died on their way to a gig decades ago, back on earth to sing again.

"Plaid Tidings" picks up where "Forever Plaid" left off. But since the plots of these shows are really just frameworks for great tunes and hilarious musical shenanigans, you don't need to know the first thing about "Forever" to enjoy "Tidings."

The show manages to segue through 57 tunes, from "O Tannenbaum" to "Mambo Italiano," "16 Tons" and back to "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," sometimes delivering just a few recognizable notes of a tune, before spinning off elsewhere.

Spinning off elsewhere is exactly what makes the humor work. A spoof of "The Ed Sullivan Show" finds the Vienna Boy's Choir, the Radio City Rockettes, Topo Gigio, the Chipmunks, an Austrian Lipizzaner stallion and a trained dog act racing across the stage.

Are some of these bits cheap theatrical bits? You bet - that's part of the humor. The comedic timing for these bits is spot on, often leaving the audience just enough time to inhale between laughs.

The Plaids are played by Marty McNamee, Paul Helm, Scott Stratton and Joe Fransee as Francis, Jinx, Smudge and Sparky, respectively. They each create sweet, naïve, geeky characters. They all sing beautifully.

The wonder of the show is that the singer-actors manage to sing in close harmony while doing things like dancing with long-handled plungers.

"Tidings" is accompanied by an onstage band of James Valcq on piano, Tom McGirr on bass and Michael Lorenz on everything from drum set to gong and steel drums.

The show's only problem, which may have been a factor of playing to a house full of people for the first time, was uneven amplification of the singers.

IF YOU GO

"Plaid Tidings" runs through Jan. 3, at the Broadway Theatre Center, 158 N. Broadway. For tickets, call (414) 291-7800, or visit www.skylightopera.com.

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