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Wholesome for the holidays

“Plaid Tidings” opens at the Skylight

BY MICHAEL RAY

Plaid Tidings follows the story of Frankie (Marty McNamee), Sparky (Joe Fransee), Smudge (Scott Stratton) and Jinx (Paul Helm), four young singers who in life were a four-part harmony group called The Plaids who tragically met their end after a busload of Catholic school girls on their way to see The Beatles perform on Ed Sullivan crashed into the Plaids. Luckily, no Beatles fans were hurt, but the Plaids got an express ticket to Heaven.

Walking into the theater, the curtains were raised high and four microphones stands sat in a straight line. The set was pure 1960s, a row of light bulbs outlining the wall like a classic vanity. The lights dimmed and four characters slinked onto stage, each clad in plaid sport coats and pants, talking about what it was like to be dead.

Seven years earlier, The Plaids had been summoned back to earth to play the concert they never had in “Forever Plaid.” Now, in “Plaid Tidings,” they have been called to perform their dream holiday special, but are completely unaware of it. Exploring their return through wacky dialogue and songs made popular before any of the actors on stage were even born, they are eventually clued-in via a heavenly phone call from Rosemary Clooney.

If this sounds completely cheesy, it absolutely was. At one point in the first act, the Plaids perform a number singing into giant plungers instead of mic stands because that’s how they’d practiced it in the basement. The whole thing seemed like a nightmare version of Lawrence Welk, but with one difference – it was actually entertaining.

Whether in the fast-paced musical numbers or the corny jokes, the four local actors infused the show with an honest innocence that drew the audience in and a sense of comic timing that left them rolling in their seats.

Helm delivered the shy awkwardness and expressions that colored Jinx while Fransee managed the semi-bravado and mischievousness of Sparky perfectly. McNamee captured the innocence and naivety of Frankie and Stratton executed the verbose dialogues and nerd-among-nerds feel of Smudge in a manner that nearly stole the show.

In a particularly funny bit, Smudge removes his thick black-rimmed glasses to get over his stage fright and ends up walking off stage and through the audience before directed back by his fellow Plaids. Stratton played up the character’s confidence in the face of idiocy and got all the laughs.

While the first act is a 50s pop rehash with songs like “Sh-Boom” and “Mambo-Italiano,” the second is pure holiday delight, delving into “White Christmas” and “Let it Snow.” The sport coats have been traded in for bright red cardigans and there is a touching tribute to Perry Como, where The Plaids perform back-up to his projected image.

“Plaid Tidings” is a reflection on a simpler time that straddles the line of being overly-nostalgic but never steps over. Sure it’s full of groaners and tacky costumes, but it also makes fun of itself and paints likable, flawed characters who engage the audience. People will find themselves smiling and rolling their eyes at the same time, but hey, that’s Christmas.

“Plaid Tidings” runs through Jan. 3 at the Cabot Theatre on Broadway. Tickets are available at the box office or at www.skylightopera.com.

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