

## Steel Beam cast expertly renews musical memories in 'Forever Plaid'

October 3, 2007

By Randall G. Mielke **Special to the sun**

Forever Plaid, the story of four singers who die in a car crash in the 1950s and return to earth for one last chance to present their big concert, can be a difficult show to present. With a sparse stage and a minimum of props, the show relies on the acting and song harmonizing of the four main characters for its success. If just one of the singers is off key, it has the potential to ruin the overall sound of the show. If one microphone stand is handled improperly, the gaffe would be very apparent. If just one line is not delivered correctly, the nostalgic mood would be broken. Fortunately, none of that happened in the Steel Beam Theatre production of the show and the presentation was smooth and satisfying.

Although the show has an unlikely premise, once audience members adjust to the idea of dead singers coming back to perform the concert that they never had the chance to present while they were alive, the evening becomes a nice, nostalgic trip down memory lane. Two dozen songs, such as Three Coins in a Fountain, Heart and Soul and Love Is a Many Splendored Thing, were expertly performed by the quartet of Jon Landvick, Michael Reyes, Kevin Bishop and Frank J. Paul.

The four Plaids, patterned after such groups as The Four Freshmen or The Crew Cuts, did an excellent job of harmonizing and bringing back the feel of an earlier time period. The choreography, by show director Ty Perry, was right on target with the synchronized hand gestures made popular by such singing groups in the 1950s.

The Plaids are four friends who met in the audiovisual club of their high school. They share a love of singing, so they form their own group and rehearse in a basement while dreaming of the fame and fortune. Their careers are cut short just prior to their biggest gig when they are killed in a car crash. If the show were just a presentation of a string of 1950s songs, the evening entertainment would be satisfying, but not all that interesting. It is the characters of The Plaids -- Jinx, Frankie, Smudge and Sparky -- that make Forever Plaid a more appealing, humorous and moving show.

Although the four men in the Steel Beam production who make up the singing group work the entire show as an ensemble, two of them seemed to bring their characters more to life. Michael Reyes as Smudge was terrific with his deadpan delivery of many comedic lines and Frank J. Paul as Sparky was good with his display of bewilderment and innocence. Jon Landvick (as Jinx) and Kevin Bishop (as Frankie) also were good, but seemed a bit more tentative and not as committed to their roles. Still, the show is a well-rehearsed, well-choreographed and a well-staged piece of ensemble work, with each performer getting his moment to shine in the spotlight.

Perhaps the most overlooked, and possibly the real star of the show, is pianist and musical director Tim Splain. On stage with bass player John Summers and drummer Pete Steele through nearly the entire show, Splain displays a skillful command of the musical material and presents the songs with flair and confidence. Splain provides the foundation on which the rest of the show is built. If he was not a solid performer, the whole show would suffer. He was the backbone of the Steel Beam production.

All of the numbers performed by The Plaids are good, but the two that capture the humor of the show are Lady of Spain and Caribbean Plaid. In the former, the four entertainers do a rendition of The Ed Sullivan Show in "three minutes and eleven seconds." While Jinx (Jon Landvick) performs Lady of Spain on an accordion, the other three Plaids present a multitude of acts that were seen on the Sullivan television program including a plate-spinning act and a recurring ventriloquist act.

In Caribbean Plaid, the troupe involves several members of the audience for a rousing trip to the isles. Not only in this number, but throughout the show, the audience participation was impressive. All of the performers seemed at ease getting people from the audience to be part of the show and it added a nice, congenial touch to the evening.

Forever Plaid is a pleasant way to kick off Steel Beam Theatre's seventh season. **THEATER REVIEW**