

Review: 'Hands on a Hardbody'

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6:50 p.m. EDT September 13, 2014



(Photo: MYKAL McELDOWNNEY, Staff)

Don't be misled by the slightly salacious title: Centre Stage's "Hands on a Hardbody" is a mostly sweet-natured musical about 10 people competing for a truck (the "hardbody") and trying to survive in tough times.

The 2013 Broadway show moseys along like a genial country song until late into Act I when the production unleashes its secret weapon: a human trumpet named Taylor Randall.

Randall, who never fails to impress, plays the giddy holy roller Norma who, backed by the rest of the cast, soars mightily on an *a cappella* gospel number called "Joy of the Lord."

As rendered by Taylor, the song is a stunner, a moment of transcendence that catapults this production into the ranks of must-see theater.

If nothing in the rest of the show quite matches the exuberance of that scene, the musical boasts plenty of heart and offbeat humor.

The country rock score (by Trey Anastasio of the rock band Phish and Amanda Green), meanwhile, is tuneful and toe-tapping, and the ensemble's harmonies are vibrant and powerful.

Ten contestants, hard-pressed though full of gumption, have gathered to try to win a truck in the small Texas town of Longview. The idea is pretty simple: The person who can keep his or her hand on the shiny new Nissan truck for the longest period of time wins the vehicle.

The hopefuls battle not only each other but rain, mosquitoes and extreme heat.

The story, with a book by Doug Wright, becomes surprisingly engrossing, like one of those grueling TV reality shows that tests stamina and endurance. At Friday's night's performance the audience gasped audibly when some characters fell by the wayside.

The musical touches on recent Great Recession issues: unemployment, veterans' challenges, poverty and prejudice. While not conspicuously political, this show, earnest rather than glitzy, elicits sympathy for the underdog and takes a swipe or two at corporate ruthlessness.

It's also got an uplifting message: Don't give up. "You're fighting for your life," one character sings, "right from the moment of your birth."

Director Melanie Ann Wiliford brings clarity and vigor to a production that, one imagines, could become stagnant with the characters attached to the truck for most of the musical.

Brady Smith offers some tasty Texas-favored social-dance choreography.

The production is broadly acted for the most part, with Texas accents fully atwangan', although a few introspective scenes provide a mellow respite.

"Hands on a Hardbody" really is an ensemble show, with each of the 10 contestants and five others having a moment to shine in a solo or duet.

John Brigham, best known in Greenville for good-guy leading roles, gets to burrow deeply into the dark soul of the embittered hunter Benny, battling a host of personal demons.

LeRoy Kennedy brings a robust voice to the cheerful Ronald, whose strategy (eating lots of candy bars) goes awry. Kennedy also is responsible for the tight musical direction.

Julio Ruiz, as Jesus Pena (an American who's mistaken for an illegal immigrant), delivers a punchy Tango-inflected "Born in Laredo."

Tony Glass is affecting as a traumatized Marine, Chris. Rod McClendon has some fine comic moments as the radio reporter Frank. Cindy Thompson

offers a strong contribution as Cindy Barnes, overseeing the contest.

Four couples provide appealing vocal episodes: Cindy Mixon and Kenneth Kraft, Arleen Black and Grady McEvoy, Sara Tolson and Brady Smith, and Hannah Smith and Daniel Marlatt.

Theater-goers should note that the show includes some strong language.

Centre Stage's rousing "Hands on a Hardbody" continues through Sept. 27. For tickets, call 864-233-6733.

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