

## Corny Fun and Good Harmony in 'Plaid Tidings'

Cabrillo Stage's holiday production pays tribute to the campy side of the '50s

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by Traci Hukill on Dec 20, 2011

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The Plaids do their holiday take on 'Matilda' in *Plaid Tidings*. Photo by Jana Marcus.

Not everything went well for Mom on this holiday trip out West. First there was the missed flight, and then there was the other missed flight, and then the fellow passenger who blabbed all the way to Chicago. But Saturday night at the Cabrillo Crocker Theater, things started to look up. That's when the four stars of *Plaid Tidings* launched into "Strangers in Paradise," followed closely by "Sh-Boom," "Mambo Italiano" and a slew of jazzed-up holiday numbers as only a quartet of clean-cut fraternity brothers from 1950s middle America could perform them.

The show's premise is pure cornball. The Plaids, having perished in 1963 when their car was hit by a bus carrying a gaggle of schoolgirls to see the Beatles (as told in the prequel *Forever Plaid*), are given a chance to return to present-day Earth to do the Perry Como-style Christmas program they always dreamed of. It takes them most of Act 1 to figure this out, though, and they

work their way through some of the campiest hits of the late 1950s in the close-harmony style of the Lettermen and the Brothers Four until they finally start working the Christmas angle with a holiday-style tribute to Harry Belafonte's "Matilda" and entertaining hand-bell versions of "Carol of the Bells" and "Mr. Santa."

The singing and acting are both strong throughout. To hear four-part harmony done at all in this era of gutted school music programs is a pleasure; to hear it done well is a rare treat. Under the musical direction and piano accompaniment of Drew Lewis (David Nordgren plays bass), this foursome turns out the kind of closely woven four-part harmony you can hardly separate into its constituent threads, and without the intonation issues that bedeviled the Cabrillo Stage cast of *Forever Plaid* in 2008. As the nerve-wracked, stage fright-battling Jinx, first tenor Tad Kistner wows the audience with a sweet, pure tone. Max Bennett-Parker (like Kistner a *Forever Plaid* veteran), often singing lead, anchors the production both musically and dynamically as the charismatic Frankie. Scotts Valley High graduate Sean Gorski as Smudge, the lanky, horn-rimmed glasses-wearing nerd, blends in beautifully as the group's baritone and has some hilarious comic moments in his somewhat spastic dance number, "Let It Snow." Matt Dunn as Sparky ably holds down the bass and emerges as a reliable comic element throughout, delivering snarky ripostes at every opportunity.

Not surprisingly, veteran Cabrillo Stage director Andrew Ceglio's sense of playfulness and wit keep this production buoyant and energetic, especially during a three-minute show-stopping recapitulation of *The Ed Sullivan Show* during which characters like Topo Gigo and Jose Jimenez dash onstage, do a few seconds of schtick and dash off again. Mom was laughing so hard she was almost weeping, and I, born too late to get the references, had to stop and imagine a three-minute *SNL* blast featuring the Pathological Liar, Stuart Smalley, Debbie Downer and Tina Fey's Sarah Palin to get the full force of how fun this is for those who knew the show.

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