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Fun all the way

By SARAS MANICKAM

Go for *Forever Plaid* if you want a fun trip down Nostalgia Street.

As wholesome as apple pie; as charming and shy as the boy-next-door; clean and innocent and completely lacking in cynicism – these are the boys of the harmony quartet, Forever Plaid. Together, they give a public performance they were unable to deliver when they were alive.

In 1964, these four boys, were on their way to pick up their custom-made plaid (but of course) tuxedos when a school bus crashed into their 1954 Mercury convertible, killing them instantly. The bus, by the way, was packed with “parochial virgins” on their way to the Ed Sullivan show to watch the Beatles. Through divine intervention perhaps, the boys return 44years later (‘the biggest come-back since Lazarus’), to perform one last time.



Forever Plaid is a showcase of songs and medleys that rekindle the magical innocence of the 50s.

This is the gist of the jukebox musical, *Forever Plaid*. Sure, it is thin on storyline but who is keeping tabs? The story is just an excuse to cruise along Nostalgia Street, down the 1950s stretch to showcase a whole lot of songs and medleys that rekindle the magical innocence of those days. Ninety minutes of hilarious moments and great songs, some most deliciously butchered such as the Beatles’ *She Loves Me* – yes, sirree!

These are goofy but nice guys with distinct personalities, individual insecurities and quirky mannerisms: Frankie (Graham Weaver), unofficial leader; geeky Smudge (Anthony Williamson) with his thick black rimmed glasses, shy Jinx (Steven Craven) and swivel-hipped Sparky (Joe Allen). As they practise in a parent's stock room, using plungers for microphones, they imagine they are performing at Madison Square. They had dreams of making it big, cutting their first album – dreams that were dashed in the fatal accident. As horribly snuffed out as their lives were, these boys remain untouched by the horror of it all – instead, they grab this second chance to relive their dreams, one last time. In one scene, interacting with the audience, Smudge says without any guile: “If we could stay longer, we’d love to work at your private functions.”

It is this innocence and a willingness to be happy that is most endearing of the characters.

The actors took some time to find their groove – the beginning was slow, almost lacking in energy. *Three Coins in a Fountain* as an opening number didn't quite get the feet tapping. The comic lines seemed forced; fortunately the audience was more than willing to accommodate them. However, once they got the rhythm, it was great fun all the way. It was more than nostalgia, watching them sing *Matilda*, *Catch a Falling Star*, *No, not much, Love is a Many Splendored Thing* and the crazily side-splitting *Perfidia*: it was sheer fun.

These boys are not a patch on the original singers but that was never the point. As they sang and moved, not always in synchronised unison, forgetting steps, stumbling just that teeny-weeny bit to reveal they were really amateurs after all, they created a warm rapport with the audience.

Each in the group was given a solo to sing with the rest as backup singers. Not all have memorable voices – they are better as back up, although Smudge's rendition of *Sixteen Tons* was a pleasure to listen to as his strong bass caressed the low and lower notes smoothly.

The cast are not memorable actors either but hey – this is jukebox shtick. The performance picks up pace, energy, passion and the laughs about 20 minutes into the show. It is then that it gets seriously entertaining.

The choreography was screamingly funny and an absolute parody of the 50s. *Caribbean Plaid*, *Matilda* and *Perfidia* had the audience in stitches but it was the Ed Sullivan parody that had them literally howling and rolling on the aisles. It was a compressed, maniacally frantic Ed Sullivan show in fast motion, possibly in three minutes flat, complete with singing nun, opera singer, Spanish lady, plate twirler, animals ... you get the idea. The comic timing was superb and Joe Allen as the Spanish lady literally stole the show. He was a riot – his feet wouldn't keep still; neither would his swivel hips; he danced, leaped, ran, jumped all over and in and out of the stage. I swear many in the audience laughed till they cried.

Forever Plaid is kitsch – but what jolly kitsch it is, for the most part. It is a comic tribute to the 1950s and a celebration of dreams and aspirations of even the quite dead. The show is an

enjoyable watch. Older folks will watch with nostalgic pleasure while the younger will appreciate the sheer melody of classic songs. And both will be glad they went along for an evening's drive down Nostalgia Street to a world that managed to remain innocent and without cynicism – at least for a while.

John Plews directs *Forever Plaid*. His daughter, Racky Plews, is the choreographer. The show is presented by Gardner & Wife Theatre from July 2 to 20, at The Actors Studio, Bangsar Shopping Complex.

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