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## There's much that's marvelous about these 'Wonderettes' at Sierra Madre Playhouse

By Frances Baum Nicholson

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A musical format which has become extremely popular, particularly in smaller venues, involves taking popular music from a particular genre and a particular time period and building a storyline around what is essentially a nostalgic concert.

If the storyline creates characters that entertain, and if the singing is up to the standard one expects when the music was first loved on a recording, the show can be a sure-fire hit with audiences.

By and large, the success or failure of at least the best of these concoctions lies at the feet of the performers and the director. If the characters doing the singing are fleshed out as interesting in themselves, and the pacing and comedic elements are structured into the piece where they need to be, it's a hit. If not, the songs alone can make it kind of interesting, but not good theater.

Fortunately, at Sierra Madre Playhouse, all the elements are there, and in service to one of the two best of this kind of show: "The Marvelous Wonderettes."

Set in a small town high school gym, a group of four girls perform first for their high school prom, and then — after intermission — at their 10th high school reunion. In the process, one gets to know their friendships, their feuds, their crushes, and their expectations, all through the singing of classics of the two periods.

They are, of course, "types," and the four women in the cast at SMP deliver a solid, well crafted ensemble performance.

Kelsey Boze is Cindy Lou, the self-focused "pretty one" who sees herself as destined to be prom queen. Kelly Klopocinski is Suzy, the bubbly optimist newly going steady with the guy in charge of their show's lighting. Kate Ponzio is Betty Jean, a friend and acolyte of Cindy Lou's recently come into her own when a boy she liked asked her to the prom. Afton Quast is Missy, somewhat geeky, a whiz at Home Economics, with a deep crush on a teacher.

All four women make these characters come to comparatively 3-dimensional life by playing them absolutely straight. Director Robert Marra has given their tiffs and gaffs legs through the choreography of their performances in ways which seem organic to the musical material and yet still centered on the individuality of the characters. The polish and the pacing of all involved make this show work, delivering plenty of laughs along the way.

And then, of course, there is the music. From “Lollipop” and “Mr. Sandman” through “Born Too Late” and “I Only Want to Be With You,” to “Leader of the Pack,” “You Don’t Own Me” and “Son of a Preacher Man,” the hits just keep rolling, entertainingly tied to the storyline in ways which prove endearing, funny and touching by turns.

Still, what always makes this show work most, when it is done right, is the underlying theme — more serious, if subtle — of what happened to girls whose view of womanhood came to fruit in the late 50s, and walked out into a world which became less and less Betty Crocker, and more and more Betty Friedan.

At SMP, it all works. Kudos to Sean Paxton, musical director as well as the small live band’s pianist. Jeff Cason creates a credible and historically appropriate “prom stage” for the girls’ performances.

Derek Jones’ lights actually become a character in the piece, and create the mood of a high school performance as well, and Cricket Myers uses SMP’s brand new sound system to make the girls’ audible and appropriately blended as the evening moves forward.

In truth, “The Marvelous Wonderettes” is not wildly profound, though when produced with this level of conviction it is very human. Still, in the end, to see it done this well is very satisfying indeed, and a lovely respite from both hot summer days and a troubled world.

One note: if you are interested, get tickets soon. They are selling like hotcakes.

*Frances Baum Nicholson has been reporting on the Los Angeles area theater scene for more than 35 years. To read more of her reviews, go to [www.stagestruckreview.com](http://www.stagestruckreview.com).*

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