

SCHOOL'S IN SESSION IN "GREATER TUNA!"

It's a sizzling, sweaty, late summer Texas day in not so mythical Greater Tuna; the third smallest town in Texas and a breeding school for bigotry and sobering as well as silly narrow-mindedness. Tuna is a town which applauds high school essays such as "Human Rights - Why Bother" and where "Roots" is banned for "only showing one side of the slavery issue."

Written in 1984 and masterfully presented at Missouri Street Theater, "Greater Tuna" balances biting satire and comedic wit with at times almost respectful affection. The audience feasts on a Tuna casserole comprised of the lives of twenty of Greater Tunas' citizens-all played by only two male actors.

The play starts out with the hysterical morning broadcast of Thurston and Arles on Tunas' own Radio Station, OKKK, with its measly 275 watts. In Tuna, it's OK to have a radio station trumpeting the Ku Klux Klan and whose trifling wattage amply illuminates the dim thinking of townsfolk. Through a cavalcade of hilarious and pathetic characters, we embrace small town scurrilous scandals, fumbling foibles and sincere but pathetic self styled dramas. It's a town where the Tasty Freeze tootsies, Inida Goodwin and Helen Bedd, schlep haute cuisine just across from the Piggly Wiggly

During two acts and twelve scenes with dizzying costume changes, we pop in for breakfast, watch a hilarious interview for "Intellect" magazine, (a periodical that will never grace Tunas' libraries), sit agog at the insane doings of a strychnine slinging canine killer whose plans go awry and cruise by the overpass and bemoan how hobos under the bridge are making it so there is nowhere fit to throw your garbage. We are then enjoined to pick up a cheap used weapon sure to kill something, uncover a funny yet evil act of revenge and commiserate with a perpetually rejected portly teenage cheerleader wannabee. We even take a serious moment for sincere prayer.

Under the true-to-script clever direction of David Lagle, a seasoned Screen Actors Guild and Actors Equity Association member, we watch precision crafted characterizations by wiry, plastic faced James Brewer and the 'oh so comfortable in my own skin', portly Yogi Bearish Richard Ryan crystallize and project the essence of twenty Tuna townsfolk. We are schooled in the mindset of a book burner, a juvenile delinquent, a cliché spouting reverend, a pathetic lovable leader of the humane society, a jilted ex lover of a newly deceased hanging Judge found dead in a Dale Evans Swimsuit and a Mogen-David wine sucking fiddler who swears he sees UFOs shaped like chalupah. These are not cardboard characters as Brewer and Ryan craft townsfolk with depth and aching hearts born of ignorance and easy unwise decisions.

Set, sound and lighting are simple, convincingly well executed and do not distract from the key focus of how Tuna headed minds, or lack thereof, work. Costumes and props by Sylvia Gregory, especially considering the split second changes, are on target hitting the character and the funny bone equally well.

Greater Tuna is a community theatre staple. However, it is more. It is a window to small mindedness complete with pursed lipped, vigilante smut snatchers and swaggering self impressed pseudo sheriffs. Trust me, when you encounter the evil fish eye of Vera Carp, the Tuna patron of piety and prejudice and chief smut snatcher, well, it'll drop you dead in your tracks.

Community theatre can improve communities in many ways. "Greater Tuna" is no exception. Solano Repertory Company Artistic Director Barbara Norris and her colleagues might consider facilitating a brief educational post show discussion for selected shows. It's a wise and clever technique to use caricatures and humor to point out the foibles and flaws to which we all can fall prey. Furthermore, the many costumes and character changes in "Greater Tuna" remind us that small mindedness and bigotry is always in our wardrobe. Only the cut of the cape, the drape of the fabric or the length of the hem change, while the fundamental ensemble of bigotry and fruits of poor education remain unaltered.

Inarguably funny and entertaining, "Greater Tuna" is at times more of a Great White shark, brandishing razor sharp teeth in jaws of ignorance with single-minded purpose. I urge readers to bring the family and put some of the timeless lessons amicably showcased in this production into heads and hearts.

The power and promise of satire and wit lay in their ability, through over the top characterizations and exaggerations, to identify truths we can not deny while using humor to prod us to accept the lessons they can teach. That's the genius of "Greater Tuna". That's the value when the "Greater Tuna" 'school' is in Fairfield until Oct 21 at Missouri Street Theater and Oct 27-Nov 18th at Benicia Old Town Theater.

Four stars

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