Dear Mrs. Ferguson, Two Thumbs Up

Michael Donato

At the beginning of the show, Director Lurana Donnells O'Malley addresses a crowded Kennedy Theatre. "Thank you for coming to support live theatre, and thank you for coming to see a musical you've probably never heard of!" The Spitfire Grill was based on the 1996 film of the same name, and had a very short run in 2001. Not many people have heard of this musical or film, but let me urge you: go see this musical production.

The music is the blood of this show, coursing through everyone on a brisk pace as we are introduced to Percy Talbot (Jorin Young) who is just released from prison and follows a photograph captioned "Autumn Colors along Copper Creek near Gilead, Wisconsin" to the small, homey town of Gilead. There, Sheriff Joe Sutter (Jeff Bracket) introduces her to The Spitfire Grill for work and a place to stay. It's owner, Hannah Ferguson (Christine Lamborn), agrees to take her on. There, Percy meets more of Gilead's residents, who (mostly) are suspicious and wary of the new girl in town: Caleb Thorpe (Akea Kahikina), who is Hannah's nephew, and the...
mail carrier Effy Krayneck (Emily Steward). Shelby Thorpe (Rachael Uyeno) is a bit warmer, and ends up helping Percy and Hannah work The Spitfire Grill, the seemingly only place in town to grab coffee and a bite to eat. There, the true story begins, of how the three women not only take care of the Spitfire Grill, but also take care of the scars and troubles in their town and their own lives.

All three women are remarkable onstage. Lamborn, thanks to her wonderful makeup and dedication to carrying her body like that of a woman with a bad hip, delivers a fun to watch Hannah that is equal parts caring and crack-the-whip. Uyeno, whose Shelby starts off a bit more quieter because of her relationship with Caleb, blossoms beautifully with delightful sincerity and empathy from her character as the show goes on, and sings one of my favorite numbers in the production, "When Hope Goes." Young as Percy is simply outstanding, as from start to finish she channels the fierce wild bird that Percy is, and with that comes energy and sharpness but also torment and emotional chaos, all which she balances beautifully while commanding a wonderful voice, delivering the showstopper of the evening, "Shine."

The supporting members of the cast were also strong in their own right. I loved to hate Kahikina's Caleb, Brackett's Joe was warm and cute, and Steward's Effy was a hoot as she pried her nose into everyone's affairs and mail. Fun separately and together, the group numbers were great, like the Stomp-inspired choreography of "Ice and Snow" and the much more modern and melancholy choreography of "When Hope Goes." Choreographer Amy Lynn Schiffner should be proud.

The music, as I said, starts brisk and is frankly one of the best parts of this show. It carries the show with windy gales and lets it settle during its more heartfelt moments. A little bit country and a little bit contemporary with many tight harmonies, it was a pleasure hearing the music, especially considering I've never heard of it before. Congratulations to Musical Director Ike Webster and his orchestra.

The set and lights work wonders together. The set is suggestive of the Spitfire Grill, wooden and two levels, but is incomplete enough so that you see the framing of the rooms but also see the projection of trees in the background. The color work with this projection of trees was masterful- a change of color could be used for a change in season, in time, or in location. The leaves became clouds then became leaves again- a very well-thought out element. Scenic Designer Rachel Filbeck and Lighting Designer Christopher Patrinos did a very fine job.

I urge you again to see this production. It tugs at your heartstrings, gets you laughing, and gets you feeling. An honest-to-goodness story about triumph through the trials of life, of the beauty of perseverance, of the quiet strength that it takes to shoulder the world. O'Malley has set the bar high for Kennedy's homecoming season, as the theatre returns in full force and regalia after a renovation hiatus. Come watch The Spitfire Grill and the three women that bring it to life.

The Spitfire Grill, UH: Kennedy Theatre