



THE HAWAII STATE THEATRE COUNCIL

presents

Hitting The Stage



Jorin Young as Percy, a recently released parolee, in UHM Kennedy Theatre's *The Spitfire Grill*
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PHOTO: John Wells

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Girls Will Be Women at The Spitfire Grill

A Review by Eleanor Svaton

[Staff Reviews](#)



There's a test most people have heard of that measures whether a narrative is at least minimally feminist-friendly: the Bechdel Test. The rules are that there must be two named female characters that speak to one another about something other than a man. Most Hollywood films do not pass this test. Go ahead and think about the movies you've seen recently... If they do pass, that's great, but still not the norm by any stretch. Now there's another test called the "Mako Mori" test, which supplies an alternative barometer for meeting the minimum: at least one female character with her own narrative arc that doesn't support a man's. I'd like to introduce the "Spitfire" test: the story is about women—women's lives, women's pain, women's spaces, women's burdens, women's joys, women's power, women's trials, women's desires, and women's strength in numbers—and they don't get saved by any men. Sure, there are a couple of men in *The Spitfire Grill* who have names, and one even has his own small narrative arc that doesn't support a woman's.

But, the “Spitfire” test means that at the center of the story are women who save themselves and the people around them of whatever gender may be in need.

Spitfire's story feels familiar: a small town, someone trying to escape the past, buried secrets, revelation and transformation. Perchance, or Percy (**Jorin Young**) as she tells the sheriff of Gilead who meets her at the train station as her new parole officer, is a young woman with a past. Hannah (**Christine Lamborn**), the matriarch of a Gilead that has seen better days to say the least, is the proprietor of the town's only restaurant: The Spitfire Grill. Shelby (**Rachel Uyeno**), Hannah's niece by marriage, is sheltered and sweet and smart. These are the three dynamic female characters that together form the heart and soul of *The Spitfire Grill*, now playing at the Kennedy Theatre at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa. In this stage musical adaptation of the film of the same name, these women come together to support one another, at first begrudgingly, and later in ways they could have never imagined. Lamborn convincingly and commandingly portrays a character much, much older than herself whether barking orders at Percy, berating her nephew, or singing and dancing around the Grill, making Hannah's story arc perhaps the most compelling of the mix. Uyeno's sweet and steady voice, physical grace, and precision in the performance of Shelby are the perfect foil to Young's raw and affective explosiveness as Percy. The actors' portrayals make sense of the attraction the characters have for one another in their abilities to display and offer the kind of strengths the other needs.

What makes this story special is how, as mentioned by **Lurana Donnels O'Malley** in her director's note, “the women of the Grill harness their own creativity to face their problems.” None of the women in Spitfire chooses to rely or depend on a man to care for or solve their problems. Instead, they go from dealing with everything alone—from essentially being alone—to sharing the burden with each other—bonding with other women in a way that is practical, nurturing, and empowering. This message is more important than any other for girls and women of all ages to see. These three women are so many of us, locked away in our pain, fear, loneliness, and regret. What keeps us locked away, so often, is lack of empathy, lack of representation, lack of alternative models for how to handle the struggles women universally face. Yes, men face struggles, too, but the world is full—over-fricking-flowing-the-brim full—of those narratives. For girls and women to learn that they can be the authors of their own fate, that they can make their own mistakes and learn from them, that they can change and grow and make their own choices, that they can choose each other over the traditional male savior and protector... these are the lessons *The Spitfire Grill* offers through its storytelling.

The male characters are mainly kept on the periphery, as is the town gossip-girl Effy (**Emily Steward**), until she starts to be contagiously infected by the positive atmosphere of the other women. Effy changes from hurtful and mean to helpful and happy in way that was delightful to watch. I actually felt sorry for her when she wasn't fully integrated as part of the women's inner circle, which shows the ability of Steward in lifting her character to much more than than the caricature she could have easily have remained.

O'Malley and company have created an entertaining, beautiful, heartwarming show. The plot is simple yet imaginative, the music and songs range from playful to soulful, and the performances and overall production are very, very good. This is a thoroughly enjoyable and ultimately satisfying musical to watch. There's just enough mystery to keep the audience looking ahead and more than enough talent and quality to keep them engaged throughout. I could say a lot more about the many barely-mentioned aspects of this production and all the artists involved, and yet I think I'll stop here. I've managed to discuss what I believe to be the most worthy of my thoughts and words. I suggest you go and decide for yourself what you find of value in a little town called Gilead, where something's definitely cooking at the Spitfire Grill.

[The Spitfire Grill, UH: Kennedy Theatre](#)