

HAWAIIREPORT

'Spitfire' brings spirited cast, music to UH theater

Review by Wayne Harada
Special to the Star-Advertiser

"The Spitfire Grill," an inspirational and accessible musical about bruised souls seeking redemption and acceptance, is an auspicious opener for Kennedy Theatre's 2017-18 season.

The theater, on the University of Hawaii campus opposite the East-West Center, finally has reopened after being shuttered for largely infrastructure updates like LED lights. The facility's inside looks the same, with its burgundy seats and warm wooden wall slats.

But this largely unknown off-Broadway musical, set in Gilead, Wis., deserves support and inspection. It's brimming with delightful performances from a spirited cast and soul-stirring, homespun, country-folk music delivered by a terrific combo that elevates the production from ordinary to extraordinary.

The story spins around a young woman named Percy

'THE SPITFIRE GRILL'

A musical by James Valcq and Fred Alley, based on a film by Lee David Zlotoff.

>> **When:** 7:30 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, 4 p.m. Sundays, through Sept. 25

>> **Where:** Kennedy Theatre, University of Hawaii

>> **Cost:** \$8-\$25, at 944-2697 or etickethawaii.com

Talbot (played with gusto by Jorin Young), just released from prison and clearly seeking a clean life, who is hired at a modest restaurant owned by an aging, cantankerous Hannah Ferguson (Christine Lamborn, appropriately bossy), who provides fodder for townsfolk to gossip and shed unwanted scrutiny on Percy.

Everyone in this tight community has baggage and something to hide. The sheriff, Joe Sutter (Jeff Brackett,

physically cute and charming), also is Percy's parole officer who found her the grill job, and is eager to acquire woodland but has other aspirations.

Caleb Thorpe (Akea Kahikina, playing a control freak) is the problematic nephew of Hannah and husband of Shelby Thorpe (Rachael Uyeno, a bit mousy but eventually self-confident), who is a perfect workplace sidekick for Percy at the Spitfire.

Then there's the town's snoop and mail courier, Effy Krayneck (Emily Steward, spot-on nosy and nimble), who makes everyone's business hers.

A mysterious Visitor (Keita Beni, who could be a poster boy for homelessness), appears several times to retrieve a nightly loaf of bread left on a tree stump by the grill. You find out why in the denouement, and also how the Spitfire becomes a stabilizing institution in this tight community.

The show, which originally ran in post-9/11 New



Rachael Uyeno, left, stars as Shelby Thorpe and Jorin Young as Percy Talbot in "The Spitfire Grill" at Kennedy Theatre, which plays through Sept. 25.

York, resonated with audiences and critics, and provided comfort and a sense of community amid the turbulent and uncertainty of terrorism. As directed by Lurana Donnels O'Malley, the message from the American heartland as interpreted by the actors can also be embraced in the current climate of oppression of women, the stigma of a

tainted past, the dizziness of politics, the issues of sexual abuse and violence, the wave of hate crimes and even the fury of Mother Nature.

The feel-good finale is akin to the current Broadway hit, "Come From Away," which specifically deals with humankind bonding following 9/11.

Ike Webster, pianist and

musical director, fronts a five-member ensemble with savvy arrangements capitalizing on the folksy charm of the setting, enabling the James Valcq-Fred Alley score (tuneful, timeless, just plain terrific) to enrich the viewing experience. Young and Uyeno are particularly outstanding in their "The Colors of Paradise" duet — capturing a sense of hope and place — and earned hurrahs and shouts of "brava."

And scenic designer Rachel Filbeck creates a warm and homey set of the grill, separating the space in three tiers, to produce a pristine big picture of a little kitchen, space for a couple of dining tables, and an upper loft home zone with a comfy, unfinished wooden adobe accented with hanging open windows. And utterly joyous: Her backdrop scrim is a kaleidoscope of shifting hues and moods in a huge half-moon visual — sometimes shimmering, sometimes sobering — to truly punctuate and illuminate the show.