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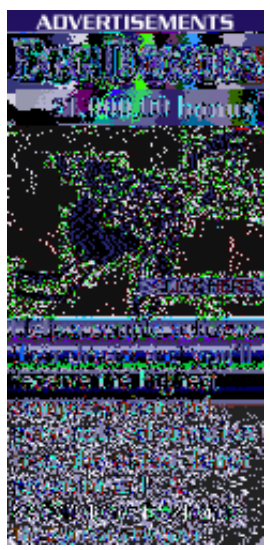


Show Guide

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SMOKE ON THE MOUNTAIN, La Mirada Jan 26 Feb 11

Reviewed by Kristina Mannion

At the local church in Mount Pleasant, N.C., in the late 1930s, singing and rejoicing on a Saturday night is still a novel experience. But Reverend Mervin Oglethorpe, the slightly anxious but always affable presiding preacher, is eager to bring some new musical entertainment to his loyal flock. And that's exactly what he does when he invites the vivacious Sanders Family Singers in for the church's first Saturday night sing in Smoke on the Mountain—a feel-good musical that turns theatregoers into toe-tapping congregation members by showcasing a slate of hummable gospel tunes and an old-fashioned charm that recalls a time in America when folks were poor in funds but not in faith. Here is a heartwarming production of this alternately humorous and reflective Connie Ray and Alan Bailey creation. With director David Hemsley Caldwell—who does double duty as the reverend-at the helm, the Sanderses' debut at Mount Pleasant unfolds with a homespun gentleness that's appealing on all levels: All the traditional gospel numbers are uplifting, and the Sanderses' humble but lively stage presence is hard to resist. In short, this musical celebration will have everyone smiling and hand clapping along with the cast by the end of the program.

Presented by McCoy Rigby Entertainment at La Mirada Theatre for the Performing Arts, 14900 La Mirada Blvd., La Mirada. Tues.-Fri. 8 p.m., Sat. 2:30 & 8 p.m., Sun. 2:30 & 7:30 p.m. Jan. 26-Feb. 11. \$35. (714) 994-6150.

Providing a good deal of the show's congenial humor, Caldwell is consistently appealing as Oglethorpe, who is eager to please his parishioners and strengthen their sense of community. Turning over the reins to the Sanderses, Caldwell's reverend is touching and funny, as he is simultaneously pleased and distressed by the family's penchant for taking over with a hearty-and sometimes calamitous-style. Filling the shoes of the Sanderses, the rest of the cast is equally charming. Patriarch Burl (Jason Edwards) and wife Vera (Linda Kerns) are amiably cheerful; Burl's burly brother Stanley (Don Bryant Bailey) is mostly laconic but sensitive; twins Dennis (Johnny Hawkins) and Denise (Emily Mikesell) are a lively pair of antsy adolescents, and other daughter June (Tess Hartman), the family's only non-singer, is shy yet spunky. Hartman often steals the limelight without even speaking, as she provides hilariously innovative sign-language interpretations of the songs or accompanies the singers with a diverse assortment of spoons, washboards, and other complementary musical instruments.

Spirited and genuine, this motley ensemble shares its vocal and musical talent with a cheerful warmth that's always engaging. And between the songs it offers an endearing representation of a real family with real issues, as funny internal squabbles are revealed and other mishaps erupt on stage. But ultimately the

heartfelt songs and moving reflections on religion communicate the fundamental spirit of the play, which harks back to an era when people often persevered with the help of good music and faith.

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