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## This 'Footloose' is sure-footed fun



By Howard Shapiro

Inquirer Theater Critic

Chemistry can almost always be explained in science, but almost never in the arts, so I can't fully construe the chemistry that makes New Candlelight Theatre's production of *Footloose* come off as far more convincing than the musical itself.

It's not just Kaylan Wetzal and Bobby Gouse, who carefully construct the characters of the two broken high school kids they play.

And it's not only the fluid stage direction by Chris Alberts, generally known in these parts (and also for this show) as a set and lighting designer. Or the striking choreography by Angela Bates Majewski - surely some of the flashiest dancing on a Philadelphia-area stage this season, for both its moves and the cast's execution.

It's all of this, plus dynamics harder to define. When our two teen heroes click as more than curious friends, on a graffitied bridge where they sing "Almost Paradise," you can feel the steam rising from the stage flooring below; they're a mixture of adorable and, suddenly, indomitable. Whatever they suffer, they'll overcome it.

And when the town's gals - performances by Candice Brechbiel, Adrienne Bergeron, and Jamie Soltis that make their peripheral characters more than sidekicks - warn in song that "somebody's eyes are watching you," Alberts' pinpoint lighting suggests that the entire town of Beaumont exists to give a kid a constant third degree.

But then, Beaumont's a town that mixes upright with uptight, and the point of *Footloose* is that the two are not automatically congruous. The script never locates Beaumont - where a high school senior named Ren moves with his mom after his dad walks out - but it's a few planets from Chicago, where Ren grew up.

He finds himself confronting a preacher (fine turns by Peyton Dixon and Gerri Weagraff as his wife) who holds sway, and that means no dancing. And that means the preacher's daughter, Ariel,

is dying to break free. And that means she and Ren are kindred spirits.

It's a simple plot and it resonates. The 1984 movie is still a much-watched DVD. The stage musical, a richer vehicle that rode onto Broadway 14 years later, in 1998, is almost a sure-shot money-maker for regional theaters.

Wetzel's portrayal of Ariel is a picture of conflicted adolescence. Gouse brings off Ren, played in the movie by Kevin Bacon, with a charisma that's only hinted at in the script. He's a natural-born dancer, and moves as if the choreography were incidental to what he would have done in any case. Brian Peeke masterfully plays a hayseed boy who, in the end, is not so clueless.

Oddly enough, the easiest part of this show for New Candlelight, the professional dinner theater just south of the Pennsylvania line, in Ardentown, Del., should be the orchestration itself, because it's pre-recorded, not live.

Yet in the performance I saw Sunday, the sound was the only element that threatened the chemistry, occasionally overwhelming the lyrics. Plus the huge cast of 24 was at times erratically miked. But you can't keep a classy troupe down. They overpowered the electronic slights, in the course of empowering *Footloose*.

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## Footloose

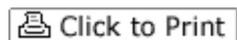
Through May 30 at New Candlelight Theatre, 2208 Millers Rd., Ardentown, Del. Tickets: \$50-\$55, including buffet dinner. Information: 302-475-2313 or [www.newcandlelighttheatre.com](http://www.newcandlelighttheatre.com).

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