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Crowd cheers Candlelight's spirited 'Footloose'

By TOM BUTLER

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The 1998 Broadway musical "Footloose" took much of the score from the successful 1984 film, including the Top 10 pop hits "Footloose," "Let's Hear It for the Boy" and "Almost Paradise," and blended them with original material by Tom Snow and Dean Pitchford.

The play also took the basic plot -- how a "wild kid from the city" teaches the upright citizens of a small Texas town that has outlawed dancing that club dancing can set them free.

The plot and much of the borrowed music seem dated, but the production at the New Candlelight Theatre manages to make the storyline much more believable and delivers plenty of energetic ensemble dancing. The large opening-night crowd cheered loudly.

A strong, deep cast helps make the contrived plot plausible, even moving. The dynamics between Peyton Dixon as the minister who forces the town to renounce dancing and Gerri Weagraff as his long-suffering wife help focus the tale's emotional pressures and explore the impact of loss and trauma on a family and a town. Both performers also present some of the show's finest songs.

Bobby Gouse as Ren, the outsider who transforms the small town, and Kaylan Wetzel as Ariel, the minister's daughter, create real attraction between the characters and provide some excellent singing and dancing. Wetzel expresses the passions and fire of the preacher's child in numbers like "The Girl Gets Around." Gouse really does stoke up the citizens of Bomont and the audience with his dramatic singing and effective dancing, although his voice sometimes falters during the strenuous dance routines.

The music from the film can't escape sounding dated. Few pop tunes hold up for 25 years, but director Chris Alberts and choreographer Angela Bates Majewski present songs like Bonnie Tyler's "Holding Out for a Hero" as disco-tinged period pieces complete with lights and smoke and manage to derive excitement from the material.

The songs created for the show have real impact. The stinging, melancholy "Learning to Be Silent," a beautiful trio sung by Weagraff, Wetzel and Erica Scanlon Harr as Ren's mother, investigates the cost of repressing personal anguish to sustain a relationship. Weagraff does equally well with "Can You Find It in Your Heart?," a thoughtful recitative that Dixon will reprise with great effect later in the show. "Heaven Help Me" showcases the turmoil in the preacher's soul as well as Dixon's powerful vocal skills. Candice Brechbiel, Adrienne Bergeron and Jamie Soltis as Ariel's cronies form a lively trio that provides comedy and crisp, synchronized dance steps in addition to some fine singing in "Somebody's Eyes" and "Holding Out for a Hero."

But "Footloose" really is about dancing. The production numbers frequently sizzle with fine ensemble work. The 24-person cast handles the challenges well. The solo turns may not always be spectacular, but the overall effect lets the audience accept -- at least for a bit -- that dancing can shape the human spirit and bring happiness out of confusion.

The prerecorded music allows for authentic volume for the rock music, but the sound system sometimes masked the voices of the soloists when they were trying to sing above the chorus. The lighting, sets and '80s-era costumes contribute solid production values to the show.

"Footloose" is great fun, and this production includes some great performances.

Additional Facts

THEATER REVIEW

What: "Footloose" by Tom Snow and Dean Pitchford and others; musical dinner theater

When: Doors open at 6 p.m., show at 8 Fri. and Sat., selected Thurs. Doors open at 1 p.m., show at 3 Sun.; through May 30.

Where: New Candlelight Theatre, 2208 Millers Road, Ardentown

Cost: \$50-\$55; children \$32 (except Saturday); includes buffet

Information: 475-2313 or www.newcandlelighttheatre.com
