

Johnny Guitar

A Fun Night of Theater

Michael C. Sherrin

Instead of envisioning the failed 1954 film of the same name, SpeakEasy Stage Company's *Johnny Guitar: The Musical* resembles a stage adaptation of *Blazing Saddles*. An enjoyable trip to the theater, *Johnny Guitar* lacks Mel Brooks' detail and subtle humor but makes up for it in sheer fun and energy.

Taking place in the Hollywood version of the wild, wild west, *Johnny Guitar* centers around saloon owner Vienna and her old flame, Johnny Guitar. Johnny's reappearance into town ignites old passions in the Dancin' Kid, an outlaw in love with Vienna, and rivalries in Emma, a bitter woman who controls the town and pines for the Dancin' Kid's affection. Emma uses her position in the town to destroy Vienna, leading to exciting songs and shootouts.

Johnny Guitar happily plays with conventional tactics as the two women, Vienna and Emma, are the starring characters who must guide the men through the dangers of the west. However, the best aspects of the musical are in the gimmicks, more so than the simple plot. We notice this right at the beginning of the show, as a small tumbleweed rolls across the stage, fore-

shadowing the numbers of spoofs that lie ahead. This is followed by Vienna's opening number, a sultry, more serious dance when compared with Madeline Kahn's stage entertainment in *Blazing Saddles*. Even Johnny Guitar gets special treatment as anytime his name is said, mysterious music is heard as a silhouette plays a guitar in the background.

The best laughs come from the classic moments spoofed to hilarity. Guitar's return to Vienna results in the obligatory exchange about them missing each other, but this moment is made enjoyable by Vienna saying exactly what Johnny tells her to say.

The musical numbers are funny and witty, with a folksy *Music Man* style. Guitar, played by Christopher Chew, stands out of the crew with one of the strongest stage voices in recent memory. Chew blended his amazing western croon with showmanship elements of Elvis. Additionally, the supporting cast delivered their own excellent performances. With four men playing upwards of four characters each, there were more costume changes than a Madonna and Cher duo tour. Their comic diversity pushed the play along at a few bumpy, dry places in the road.

Johnny Guitar caters to the musi-

cal comedy lover, with songs starting in the typical fashion and ending in unexpected places. Though only a minute long ditty, Guitar sings "All a man needs is a smoke and good cup o' coffee" as a comedic pleasure. "Bad Blood," sung by Vienna and Emma, epitomizes the clichéd rivalries in the west and is easily the best song in the show.

With a play full of hilarious gimmicks, credit must be giving to the technical achievements. The amazing lighting effects provided rich color, detailed patterns, and far more aesthetic pleasure than one would imagine. The scrim in the background changed colors to reflect the time of day, and even had a full moon when the moment was right.

While both Kathy St. George (Vienna) and Margaret Ann Brady (Emma) gave great performances, there were times when the men overpowered their female costars during musical numbers. Moments where a powerful, female belt would have been appreciated were traded in for light, airy voices. Once backup singers joined St. George on stage during the opening number, the four men drowned out an otherwise entertaining performance.

Also, as funny as *Johnny Guitar: The Musical* could be, this production seemed to lack the dry, black humor that the book and film are remembered for. This musical production went for straight campy wit, with the love-square of Guitar, Vienna, the Dancin' Kid, and Emma aching for a confusing musical number that would have appeared in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Even Emma, the villain, had the signs of a great character who didn't get fleshed out in revisions. She had a great moment of wickedness during "Who Do They Think They Are?" where she finishes with a classic maniacal laugh, but falls flat from then on.

Johnny Guitar is the kind of show off-Broadway nurses (also, where *Guitar* started) but summer stock and high schools love. The SpeakEasy's production is worth seeing for musical comedy aficionados and western buffs. The show entertains and leaves the audience happy before dinner, but discussions will be short during the meal.

Johnny Guitar is playing at the Boston Center for the Arts at 527 Tremont Street through December 18th. For more information call 617-933-8600 or go to www.bcaonline.org.



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