

Theater Review: Idol chatter at Pa. Playhouse

By PAUL WILLISTEIN
 pwillistein@tnconline.com

When the reality of the "Miss American Pageant" isn't enough and the best-known female beauty/talent show resorts to Reality TV, you know it's an idea whose time has come and gone.

That's why "American Idol" placed off-stage drama (including that of its panel of judges) center stage, spinning it into a pop culture phenomenon.

Playwright Beth Henley was tuned into the backstage story of pageants a quarter-century ago when "The Miss Firecracker Contest" debuted at Manhattan Theatre Club in 1984. It became a 1989 film with Holly Hunter reprising the title role. Henley's better-known 1983 play, "Crimes of the Heart," became a 1986 film.

Mississippi native Henley's farcical look at a Southern pageant, while not audience-

participation as similar Americana-themed shows ("Pump Boys & Dinettes," "Nunsense," "Forever Plaid"), set the stage for the media culture's obsession with small-town life, big-city dreams and delusional behavior leading to: A. anti-social competitiveness and the reality TV show "Crowned" (starring Clausville's Carson Kressley) or, B. crimes of ambition and the Texas Penitentiary.

In "The Miss Firecracker Contest," through Feb. 10 at Pennsylvania Playhouse, Bethlehem, Carnelle Scott (bouncy, bubbly, breathless Jen Kurtz) wants to put her "Hot Tamale" days behind her by being chosen "Miss Firecracker" on the Fourth of July deep in the heart of Mississippi.

Carnelle has two strikes (not including the town's "Carnelle" knowledge of her): She can't dance and she can't twirl. She's convinced her winning

personality will win out in her "tap dance, march-type thing" to the "Star Spangled Banner."

She's enlisted the aid of young seamstress Popeye Jackson (delightful Nichi McFarlane), wearing glasses as thick as Coke bottle bottoms.

Popeye gets a look at Carnelle's brother Delmount (perplexed Keith M. Moser) and develops a crush (it could be the poor eyesight). Delmount only wants to avoid pageant director Terry Mahoney (Suzy Gunkle). Meanwhile, back at the carnival, Mac Sam (Mark Nathanioule) is as high as a helium balloon over Carnelle.

Looking aghast at the carryings-on is Elaine Rutledge (peevisly fizzy Cindy Stauffer), a former Miss Firecracker who's learned to take a sensible course, even if her shoes do not.

Director Clair M. Freeman makes the most of the dated

material.

Henley tried to find sitcom-style humor in maternal cancer, an uncle falling off of a roof and father dropping dead, too.

The actors do their best. Stauffer, with haughty sashays, quizzically amusing facial expressions and air of self-absorbed cynical pragmatism, hits all the right nuances.

Just like those reality TV shows, the reality of "The Miss Firecracker Contest" is more interesting than the production itself.

That was evident opening night when Stauffer and McFarlane successfully passed the true test of an actor when they ad-libbed after the light board went out and the stage was plunged into darkness for several minutes.

It's not who won or lost "The Miss Firecracker Contest," but how they played the play.

THEATER REVIEW

Lively 'Firecracker' more character study than comedy

By Dave Howell

Special to The Morning Call

Pennsylvania Playhouse is going south for the winter. Director Clair Freeman is taking audiences to a small Mississippi town for "The Miss Firecracker Contest."

On the surface, "The Miss Firecracker Contest" is a mixture of comedy and Southern gothic, and there are elements of both. But it is actually more of a character study. Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Beth Henley, best known for her Broadway hit, "Crimes of the Heart," explores hopes, dreams, and self-acceptance, although some of the ruminations are clichéd and not fully developed.

As the play opens, Carnelle Scott (Jen Kurtz) is practicing her dance routine. She would rather be known as "Miss Firecracker" than "Miss Hot Tamale," a

name she has earned around town for her less than pristine reputation.

Other visitors arrive. Nearsighted Popeye Jackson (Nichi McFarlane) helps Carnelle with her costume.

Carnelle's cousin Elain (Cindy Stauffer), a former teenaged Miss Firecracker, shows up as a refugee from her conventional marriage and two sons. And Cousin Delmount (Keith M. Moser) appears after being released from a mental institution, hoping to sell the family home where Carnelle lives.

In Act Two, as Carnelle nervously prepares for the contest, she runs into former lover Mac Sam (Mark Nathanioule), a philosophical carnival worker, and Terry Mahoney (Suzy Gunkle), a pageant coordinator who has her eye on Delmount. Meanwhile, a romance begins between Delmount and Popeye.

At two-and-a-half hours, "Firecracker" is a bit long. For those expecting a comedy, there are not many laughs. The cast plays with energy and panache. Kurtz contrasts helplessness and a natural attractiveness, keeping you guessing about her chances. The other cast members are quirky or downright strange without going over the top, although some do not come off as true Southern eccentrics.

■ "The Miss Firecracker Contest," 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 3 p.m. Sunday, through Feb. 10, Pennsylvania Playhouse, Illick's Mill Road, Bethlehem. Tickets: \$20; \$17, seniors and children under 19, Friday and Sunday. 610-865-6665, www.paplayhouse.org.

Dave Howell is a freelance writer.
Jodi Duckett,
Asst. Entertainment Editor
jodi.duckett@mcall.com
610-820-6704

'Miss Firecracker' to light up Pa. Playhouse

Pennsylvania Playhouse opens its 2008 season with Beth Henley's southern-fried comedy, "The Miss Firecracker Contest," Jan. 25, 26, Feb. 1- 3 and 8- 10. Shows are at 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays and 3 p.m. Sundays.

"The Miss Firecracker Contest" is regarded as the second-most popular comedy from Pulitzer-Prize winning author Henley. Her first comedy, "Crimes of the Heart," was a Broadway hit.

The Pennsylvania Playhouse production is directed by Clair M. Freeman. He has directed several productions for the Playhouse, including "Brighton Beach Memoirs," "Bedroom Farce"

and "Nine."

The cast consists of Playhouse regulars Jen Kurtz (Carnelle), Suzy Gunkle (Tessy) and Keith M. Moser (Delmount). Cindy "Syd" Stauffer (Elain), Nichi McFarlane (Popeye) and M. Nathanioule (Mac Sam) complete the cast.

"The Miss Firecracker Contest" takes place in Brookhaven, Miss., a few days before the Fourth of July. Carnelle Scott, (known locally as "Miss Hot Tamale") is rehearsing furiously for the Miss Firecracker contest in the hopes that winning will salvage her tarnished reputation and allow her to leave town in a blaze of glory.

The unexpected arrival of her cousin Elain (a former Miss Firecracker herself) and Elain's eccentric brother Delmount complicates matters. Aided by a touchingly-awkward seamstress, among others, Carnelle perseveres, leading to an unexpected ending filled with hilarity, compassion and moving lyricism.

"The Miss Firecracker Contest," originally produced for a limited run by The Manhattan Theatre Company, moved to a larger Off-Broadway house to settle in for a lengthy run. The cast included Holly Hunter, Mark Linn-Baker and Patricia Richardson.

In many amateur productions of "The Miss Firecracker Contest," the actress playing Carnelle wears a crimson wig (the character dyes her hair crimson red to help her capture the Miss Firecracker title).

In the Pennsylvania Playhouse production, Jen Kurtz has dyed her own hair crimson (as the author recommends). Before she colored it, her waist-length hair was cut and she donated more than a foot and a half of hair to the Locks of Love program.

Ticket information: 610-865-6665, www.paplayhouse.org



THEATER REVIEW

by Bill Thobaben

Pennsylvania Playhouse

THE MISS FIRECRACKER CONTEST

Here's a play that has age on it. There's no way, however, that you can call this Beth Henley comedy vintage or dated because it's just as relevant today as it ever was. And it's funny to boot.

Henley has made a career out of writing great women's roles and this play is no exception. Director Clair Freeman has used this aspect very well and allowed the play to bloom in a feminine way without becoming the stage equivalent of a chick flick. It's a long play and once or twice it appeared as if the characters are just spinning their wheels but Freeman keeps things moving. I would have liked tighter cue pick-up but I'm certain that will happen as they perform and find the laughs.

The set looks a tad incomplete when you first come in but it works very well and during the intermission you find out what's going on. The entire set, designed by Mike Quinn and built by Quinn and Ralph Montesano, is on wheels and turns around creating a different set for Act II. Dan Lewis's lighting design is, as always, good and Nancy Mikkelsen's costumes are lovely.

The plot revolves around Carnelle Scott who might be said to have not led an exemplary life but who has turned her life around and wants to leave the small town where she lives with "a crimson blaze of glory." Her plan is to win the annual 4th of July beauty pageant and become Miss Firecracker. Jen Kurtz plays Carnelle with the energy the character needs as she goes through highs and lows trying to make her dream come true. Kurtz goes from excited optimism to tearful dejection easily and believably.

Carnelle's cousin, Elain, played by Cindy Stauffer,

shows up at the old homestead for her own reasons but immediately falls into the give and take of Carnelle's quest with only a few more takes than she has gives. Stauffer does an excellent job keeping the character superior and yet desperate at the same time while getting some great laughs when she starts heaving roses. The last member of this family group is Elain's brother, Delmount, played by Keith M. Moser with a nice mix of southern gentleman and southern scallywag. Part of the charm of these three is the fact that they're born and bred southerners and the performers don't let that slip.

Popeye is written almost as an exposition machine but Nichi McFarlane does far more with her than just that by giving the character an innocence and believability that carries Popeye beyond just a way to get out information and into a very funny and honest character. Suzy Gunkle's Terry comes blasting out on stage and demands we pay attention and Gunkle gives it a solid performance that is very funny.

Mark Nathanioule plays Mac Sam with a gentle down-home style making him a likeable and enjoyable character but Henley seems to have lost touch with him as the character who, although likeable and winning our sympathies, borders on tragic. Nathanioule veers away from that aspect of the character but can't avoid it completely as he makes Mac into just a nice guy.

This is the first show of their new season. As they've done in previous years, the first play is a challenge to the audience but it's worth it. For reservations, call 610-865-6665.

T+C 1-31-2008