

Southern comfort 'Savannah Sipping Society' is a cocktail for the soul

It was a welcome change to go to Dutch Apple Dinner Theatre and see a play. Don't get me wrong, I love musicals, but I also enjoy productions where characters don't spontaneously burst into song. Dutch Apple does offer a play every few years. The last was "Shear Madness" in 2017.

On Jan. 10, sated on peach-glazed pork from Dutch Apple's all-you-can-eat buffet, I sat back and thoroughly enjoyed "Savannah Sipping Society."

The show

The play is fairly new, having made its world premiere in 2016. It was written by the trio of Jessie Jones, Nicholas Hope and Jamie Wooten. Wooten was a writer for "The Golden Girls," and his talents are very noticeable in the play — which, coincidentally, is also about four vastly different women (one a little older than the others) who come together in friendship.

"Savannah Sipping Society" focuses on four women, all fairly new to Savannah, three of whom meet by chance at a hot yoga class and plan an impromptu happy hour.

Randa (played by Kathy Becker) is a Type-A workaholic who is struggling to cope with an unexpected setback in her career. After the loss of her husband and their retirement plans, Dot (Nikki Yarnell) is facing the almost insurmountable task of starting over alone.

Texas-bred MarlaFaye (Bonner Church) has come to Savannah after losing her unfaithful husband to a much younger dental hygienist. Also new to town is the spirited Jinx (Molly Samson), who offers her services as a life coach to the women. However, while Jinx is busy trying to get their lives back on track, she overlooks her own need for some guidance.

Despite their differences, these women bond and discover lasting friendships and a renewed determination to live in the moment — and most importantly, realize it's never too late to make new old friends.

The cast

EPAC vet Kathy Becker, originally a swing (understudy) for the role of Randa, was so wonderful that it's impossible to imagine anyone else in the part. She terrifically channeled the spirit of versatile southern belle Anna Camp ("Pitch Perfect," "True Blood"). I knew I was going to love her character from the second she started talking.

Bonner Church was an absolute hoot as MarlaFaye. Fresh off the heels of performing in Dutch Apple's previous production, "Holiday Inn," Church didn't waste any time transitioning into MarlaFaye.

The Fourth Wall



Melissa
Hunnefield

As she'd formerly portrayed Ouiser in "Steel Magnolias" (a play with a similar vibe) and is a Kentucky native, she was a natural fit for the part. Toss in a little of that Kathy Bates "Fried Green Tomatoes" edge, and it was easy to see why MarlaFaye was a crowd favorite.

Nikki Yarnell's role probably had the biggest challenge. Dot is the oldest member of the Sipping Society. Over her career, however, Yarnell has played roles well beyond her actual age (Mary Lazarus in "Sister Act," MeeMaw in "Stand by Your Man," and Ruth in "Pirates of Penzance). She's really, really good at it. Somewhat ditzy Dot is definitely the Betty White/Rose of the group, and Yarnell played it to the hilt.

And then there's Jinx. It's probably safe to say that she's the "sexpot" of this band of revelers. But behind her forward exterior looms a lot of pain; Jinx's character has come to town to care for an older sister in the late stages of a memory-robbing disease. It was really hard to take my eyes off actress Molly Samson as the complexities of Jinx unfolded.

Fans of "The Golden Girls" and "Steel Magnolias" will quickly make character assumptions about these ladies and their roles. But, while the comparisons are there to be drawn, thanks to the directorial choices of Kelly Legarreta, Dutch Apple's "Savannah Sipping Society" gives us four new, relatable women to raise our glasses with.

Sitting on the veranda with Jinx, Dot, Randa, and MarlaFaye will warm your heart, split your sides with laughter, and may even have you reaching for a tissue.

"Savannah Sipping Society" will be staged at Dutch Apple, 510 Centerville Road, Lancaster, through Feb. 15. Included with tickets are the all-you-can-eat buffet. Select your seats online at dutchapple.com, or call the box office at 717-898-1900.

Features Editor Melissa Hunnefield welcomes your comments and questions at mhunnefield.eph@lnpnews.com.



Submitted photo

Nikki Yarnell (left) plays Dot Haigler, and Molly Samson is Jinx Jenkins in Dutch Apple's "Savannah Sipping Society."