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# Cutting loose with OAT's Footloose - PHELPS COUNTY

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*By Corbin Kottmann June 26, 2017 Publication: Rolla Daily News (MO) Page: 1 Word Count: 852*

Ozark Actors Theatre premiered their production of Footloose this past weekend, inviting the community to experience a classic that's been thrilling audiences from the stage since 1998, but doing so with a fresh eye and enthusiasm.

Fans of the movie and play alike will find something to enjoy in OAT's most recent production, finding familiar faces onstage as they tell the story in their own way, with voices and choreography to match what audience might expect from such an iconic show, and maybe take it a little further.

The show introduces us to Ren McCormack, portrayed by OAT newcomer Nicholas Reese. From the moment he enters, Reese proves why he was chosen to take the lead in a show all about dancing. Along with his high-energy movements, Reese delivers Ren's lines with an enthusiastic beat while the audience instantly falls in love with the show's protagonist. Even long time lovers of the show will find themselves wondering what Reese will do next, and he'll always answer with an enjoyable surprise.

Hollyn Gayle returns to the OAT stage as Ariel Moore, the show's other protagonist. Gayle gives the layers her character deserves, portraying all at once a high school girl who is wild and uninhibited while at the same time solemn and thoughtful. Her acting talents are matched by her powerful voice, which she expertly wields in just the right way.

Supporting cast doesn't quite describe the rest of the characters alongside Ariel and Ren, as each actor creates a spotlight all their own, elevating characters from the sidelines to center stage.

Gayle is joined by a cohort of friends, Arleen, Rusty and Wendy Jo, respectively played by Jennifer Barnaba, Melissa Campbell and Kelsey Sumrall. Each one holding their own onstage and blending their voices together to create a powerful trio that wowed the audience members with their harmonies and humorous remarks throughout the play.

Melissa Campbell in particular captivated the audience with her fledgling romance with lovable goof, Willard Hewitt, played by Caleb Long. Long's character is shown to be quiet and not always well-spoken, but Long's acting skills made sure he was always in the forefront of the audience's mind.

Long described Willard as being one of his "dream roles" and his enthusiasm is seen as he interacted with the other characters throughout the show. The interaction between Long and Campbell through their characters is charming and solid.

The mothers of the show, played by Jamie Unger and Laura Light bring a solemn grace to the stage in contrast to the younger cast. During their songs, they both show use of elegant, well rounded musical tones, especially when singing and blending with each other. And the tender moments they share with their respective "stage children", shows they're just as capable with

their lines as they are with their voices.

Rev. Shaw Moore is played by OAT returner Bryan Dobson, who expertly shows the many different sides of his character when called for. While the character is largely seen as an antagonist for much of the show, Dobson's acting still makes the audience feel for him as his character is explored.

And while the character of Chuck Cranston is more one dimensional than the others, Christopher Burch who plays him is not. This is Burch's debut with OAT, and his portrayal of Cranston proves that while we may hate a character, we can still love and appreciate their performance.

The rest of the cast shows their expertise with the script and the score throughout the show. Even when the number of actors on stage is small, they still have a big sound. This remains true even when the choreography requires them to bounce around stage while singing. Watching the cast sing out while jumping rope is well worth the price of admission.

For a show filled with characters proclaiming the sins of dancing and loud music, the cast utilizes both with flair. The audience is even treated to a rare glimpse of the musicians of the show, as they are hosted onstage throughout the performance, giving the music an immediate and urgent feeling.

OAT's set design for Footloose uses the entirety of the stage to their advantage, letting their cast fill in in layers and adding depth to each scene.

The audience is able to look into what's happening onstage, rather than simply stare at it.

The set's architecture uses simple white screens to enhance the atmosphere of each scene by using bold backlighting, changing color to reflect the time of day, or what's being said. It's a simple change that creates a dramatic effect.

Tickets for Footloose can be obtained through Ozark Actors Theatre's website. The show runs again Thursday through Sunday this week, with two shows on Friday.

Anyone looking to "cut loose" will surely have a good time with this show, featuring faces from both in and out of town, and the heartwarming story of an American classic is great way to spend a summer evening.

OAT's production of Footloose features fast paced fun and choreography with cast that possesses the enthusiasm to do the job while. Tickets for the next run of performances can still be purchased through OAT's website. PHOTO PROVIDED

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**Rolla Daily News (MO)**

**Date:** June 26, 2017

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