

Theater review

'The Grave White Way'

Hudson Backstage Theatre,
Hollywood
Through June 17

By Ed Kaufman

Joe Patrick Ward's latest musical "The Grave White Way" — a world premiere at the Hudson Backstage Theatre — is a classy, sophisticated comic sendup and a sheer delight.

And it comes with a cast — Greg A. Curtis, Lesli Margherita, Amy Ruthberg, Joshua Finkel, Shannon Stoeke and piano accompanist Ward — that is talented and terrific. Ward, who wrote the book, lyrics and music, tells the story of five dead actors who attempt to gain admittance to Musical Theater Heaven by performing an "afterlife revue" of the disastrous flops that condemned them to musical theater purgatory — aka the Grave White Way.

As they attempt to sing, dance and talk their way into heaven — the land of the Great White Way musicals of the American past — they face a questioning offstage God, who seems to like musicals

THE GRAVE WHITE WAY

Presented by Jason Raitt, Michael Weiner and Alan Zachary in association with Gary Blumsack and the Hudson Backstage Theatre and Curtain Down Prods.

Book-music-lyrics Joe Patrick Ward
Director Sarah Gurfield
Choreographer/musical staging Kay Cole
Scenic designer Gary Wissman
Costume designer Jeannie Campi
Lighting designer Michael Zinman
Sound designer Jon Massena

Cast:

Greg Astin Cartier Greg A. Curtis
Lindsay McKenzie Lesli Margherita
Amanda Rothchild Amy Ruthberg
Jacob Finney Joshua Finkel
Sheldon Scott Shannon Stoeke
Joel Parson Wolfe Joe Patrick Ward

and has an ear for show tunes. And much like the voice-over in "A Chorus Line," God comments on their efforts. Just one more audition.

As they perform, God ponders their collective fate. Soon we are in the fictional failure world of such musical comedy creators as Felix Gelf, Dickey Ernest and Gus Pusman, whose warped sensibilities and bad musical judgment earned them a spot in the Grave White Way.

All is set in musical theater purgatory: a bare backstage area with

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'Grave'

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a flight of steps. Credit Gary Wissman for the set, Jeannie Campi for the costumes, Michael Zinman for the lighting and Jon Massena for the sound.

Sarah Gurfield's savvy direction is sure and swift while Kay Cole's choreography is both inventive and derivative. All of it is right on.

All told, there are 20 spoof numbers in the show, ranging from the sultry, sexy Margherita's "My Parents Love Him So" from the musical failure "Riverboat Regina" (a sequel to "Show Boat") to "Goin' to the Cockfights," from "Wichita!" (a successor to "Oklahoma!").

Curtis and Stoeke are a fitting Oscar Wilde and Alfred Lord Douglas in "I'm Just Wilde About Oscar"; Finkel/Ruthberg/Margherita are wonderful as the Borden family in "Bury the Hatchet" from the memorable Pusman flop "40 Whacks 40!" and there's a musical salute to the nuclear bomb in the Dickey Ernest fiasco "Do I Hear a Boom?"

Add "Who's the New Guy?" from "Nazareth High" (a send-up of "Jesus Christ Superstar"); "My Heart Is in My Chest" from "Lady Hiroshima" (in the style of "Miss Saigon") and a Sondheim-inspired "On the Trail" and "Eat Me" from "Winter in the Woods With Donner."

There's even a different celebrity at each performance of this show, which runs through June 17.

On opening night it was the Broadway star John Raitt who sang "Darling Sally from Death Valley," a song from that great 1946 failure "Village Idiot." □

PATTY ONAGAN
ENTERTAINMENT