

The Grave White Way



MICHAEL LAMONT

Hudson Backstage Theatre

Through June 17

310/289-2999

Think of Joe Patrick Ward's new musical "The Grave White Way" as a sort of distant cousin to Gerard Alessandrini's "Forbidden Broadway" series. "Grave" is a revue in the guise of a book musical, incorporating a string of intentionally ridiculous camp numbers, tied together by the thinnest of plots. The major differences between this send-up and Alessandrini's perennially popular spoofs is that these are original songs (not parodies) and are drawn from fictional musicals (not real ones). The hook is that a group of performing veterans of disastrous Broadway musicals have died and gone to a sort of Times Square purgatory, where they perform a series of numbers from their long-forgotten stage stinkeroos. Ward's intermittently hilarious creation shows great promise, but it includes some misfired segments and others that run on long after the joke has played itself out. A major plus is that some melodies sound good enough to be in a real hit musical. The premiere production is bolstered by an amiable cast whose sense of fun is infectious, as well as Sarah Gurfield's energetic direction and Kay Cole's witty choreography. The ensemble consists of two charming leading-man types (Shannon Stoeke and Joshua Finkel); a delightful song-and-dance man (Craig A. Curtis); a beautiful comedienne (Lesli Margherita) boasting the glamour of Tina Louise and the rubber face of Carol Burnett; and finally a chameleon-like actress/singer of charm and wit (Amy Rutberg). Ward, who wrote book, music and lyrics, also provides zesty piano accompaniment. Among the highlights is the title song from "Oh Helen," a politically incorrect musical version of "The Miracle Worker," with Margherita as a scenery-chewing Annie Sullivan and Rutberg as the upstaged Helen Keller. A zany medley performed by the company makes satirical mincemeat out of "A Chorus Line," and another delightful group number follows a teenage Jesus Christ through high school (shades of Terrence McNally's "Corpus Christi"). A homophobic love duet between Oscar Wilde (Curtis) and the apple of his eye, Alfred Lord Douglas (Stoeke) hilariously sends up the suppressed passions of the Victorian era. Technical credits are solid, namely Gary Wissmann's clever set, Jeannine Campi's smart costumes, and Michael Zinman's crisp lighting. A major guest star does a cameo at each performance and on the night reviewed, it was the still-charismatic Broadway veteran John Raitt ("Carousel," "The Pajama Game"). Although the material could use some splicing, dicing and sharpening, musical comedy fans should find sufficient merriment here.

--Les Spindle