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Forever Plaid

Astoria Performing Arts Center (APAC)

Astoria, NY - May 2006

Reviewed by **John Kenrick**



Ryan J. Ratliff, Shad Olsen, Frederick Hamilton and Joseph Torello in APAC's *Forever Plaid*.

Most any theatre company can stage an enjoyable revival of an established hit, but it is a rare thing indeed to find a revival that actually matches the excitement and energy of the original -- and that is exactly what the Astoria Performing Arts Center is offering in its superb new production of *Forever Plaid*. What makes it all the more delicious is that they are doing this in a Queens basement. Yes, great theatre *can* happen anywhere!

Its been a challenging year for this spunky little theatre company, which has kept up an ambitious production schedule despite administrative changes and the loss of its longtime theatre. APAC's current performing home is a cellar theatre in a townhouse right beside the Triborough Bridge -- the sort of cozy, improvised space where off-Broadway companies used to work magic in days gone by. Well, thanks to APAC, the spirit of those days lives again, and the result is two of the jolliest hours I've spent in any theatre this year.

Stuart Ross's *Forever Plaid* is deceptively simple. A male pop quartet killed in a 1964 car crash (en route to their first professional gig) has been stuck ever since in some kind of limbo. They return to earth for one night only, in order to give their concert and fulfill their dream, filling the stage with hokey comedy, endearing personal revelations, and tons of gorgeous close-harmony singing. Filled with classic period hits ("Three Coins in the Fountain," "Rags to Riches") and bolstered by affectionate tributes to such cultural icons as Ed Sullivan and Perry Como, *Forever Plaid* is a sure-fire audience pleaser for most any age group. As a result, many amateur and professional productions have assumed that all this show requires is four good singers and some accompaniment -- quite forgetting that the long-running original production relied on creative staging and performers with extraordinary comic instincts.

The men of *Forever Plaid* show off their long dreamt-of LP covers.



Fellow Plaid fans will be delighted to learn that APAC puts this loveable show back into top-notch working order. Director **Brian J. Swasey** has the good sense to respect the key routines built into the show, but he goes the extra mile by throwing in plenty of ingenious touches and

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selecting a cast of gifted singing actors. No "going through the motions" here -- this is as real and fresh as a brand new hit. With solid support from musical director **Jeffrey Campos**, a simple but handsome set by **Ryann D. Lee**, and extremely creative lighting by **Erik J. Michael**, Swasey & company deliver a swift-paced, utterly disarming *Forever Plaid*.

The four fictional troubadours is given a clear and immediately recognizable personality, and each gets ample opportunities to shine. By the final number, you feel a genuine affection for this quartet, and a genuine regret that the fun is ending. (And when was the last time that you *really* regretted that a show was over?) Every cast member is a potential show-stealer, so its a good thing they are evenly matched. **Frederick Hamilton** is a handsome and hilarious Frankie, **Joseph Torello** makes the bass-singing Smudge a loveable teddy bear, **Ryan J. Ratliff** is an adorable and daffy Jinx, and **Shad Olsen** is irresistible and charming as Sparky. I watched an audience that ranged in age from seniors to school kids fall head over heels in love with this show and give this cast that rarest of honors -- a genuine, cheering, standing ovation at a neighborhood theatre.

What a pity APAC's *Forever Plaid* only runs for three weeks -- otherwise, I would go back time and again just to revel in it all. Kudos to APAC for carrying on its six year tradition of quality theatre in Astoria. Would that all of the outer boroughs could boast productions as delightful as this!

This production is sceduled to close on May 14, 2006.

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