

THEATRE REVIEW

Greater Tuna still a treat

BY NANCY STETSON
Florida Weekly Correspondent

There's something about the South that cultivates eccentrics, and in "Greater Tuna" we're introduced to an inarguably odd crop of them. Pete Alexsy and Bill Taylor portray 19 citizens of Greater, Tuna, Texas — misfits, oddballs, sad sacks, bigots and blowhards, all larger-than-life characters — plus one dog: a non-stop yipping dog named Yippy.

Theater Conspiracy's performed "Greater Tuna" numerous times before (as well as its holiday version, "A Tuna Christmas") so its loyal audiences could be forgiven for thinking, "Oh no, not again." But it's like an old movie you've seen many times before: you start watching it, and you're pulled in again.

So OK, some of the lines aren't as fresh or funny as they were originally, but this production of "Greater Tuna" still has the ability to amuse and yes, even make you

guffaw or laugh out loud.

Alexsy and Taylor portray all of the characters — old, young, male, female— and they're quite a sight in dresses with their hairy arms, hairy legs and moustaches.

Taylor's Didi Snavelly is one of the better-

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developed characters, and one of my favorites. The owner of a used-weapons store, the chain-smoking Didi, dressed in green helmet and camouflage poncho, speaks with a gravelly voice that makes her sound as if she has a five-pack a day habit.

And his Vera Carp, in pink dress, pink pillbox hat and pink cat's eye glasses, also earned laughs as she led a meeting of the Smut Snatchers of the New Order, a club that wants to delete words from the dictionary that they deem offensive. She's also against bilingual education with the exception of a few phrases such as, "This isn't what I ordered." Using a Texas twang and a

flat delivery, Taylor absolutely slaughters the Spanish phrases his character speaks, making them indecipherable even to native speakers of the language.

Alexsy shines as Pearl Burras, especially in a scene where she speaks to the town's newly dead judge in his casket, gloating over him, taunting him, and even singing and dancing over the corpse. And his Reverend Spikes has all the charm and sincerity of a used-car salesman. His eulogy for the dead judge is nothing but clichés and adages strung together, bringing absurdity to new heights.

His Bertha Bumiller wants to ban four books from libraries nationwide, including "Roots" because "it shows only one side of the slavery issue" and "Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee" because it "shows the U.S. government can't be trusted to keep a treaty."

These characters are pro-gun and pro-censorship, and anti-anyone or anything that doesn't look like them or think exactly the way they do.

The play, written by Jason Williams, Joe Sears and Ed Howard, is structured around a series of radio broadcasts at the local station OKKK. Alexsy and Taylor play radio hosts as well as the townspeople who wind up on the air.

The set is simple but effective: a Formica kitchen table with two chairs and an old-fashioned microphone. The five back panels have been painted to look like



a waving Texan flag, and an old radio on a shelf is spotlighted in-between scenes. Unfortunately, the lines we're supposed to be hearing over the radio aren't that clear, and audience members whose hearing isn't as sharp as it once was will miss some clever banter.

It's a short show, maybe 90 minutes including intermission, but its success rests on the two men's shoulders. It's a theatrical marathon for them, as they rush off-stage to don another costume and another quirky character's persona. They do well with differentiating the various characters, though a couple of them rely too heavily on overplayed visual tics — blinking or bulging eyes, sticking out one's tongue.

Sure, Theater Conspiracy's produced the play before, but these two actors have fun with it. Like many others, I'm looking forward to the new plays and premieres the company's known for.

But all in all, "Greater Tuna's" not a bad night at the theater. ■

If you go

- >>What: "Greater Tuna"
- >>When: through Sept. 29
- >>Where: Off-Broadway Palm Dinner Theatre, 1380 Colonial Blvd.
- >>Cost: \$19 to \$39
- >>Info: Call 278-4422 for tickets or more information, or go to www.broadwaypalm.com



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