

## Review

# BWW Reviews: *Pump Boys & Dinettes* from Tennessee Repertory Theatre

By: **Jeffrey Ellis**, *Broadway World*

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Over the years, Rene Dunshee Copeland, Pam Atha and Martha Wilkinson have collaborated numerous times on all sorts of musicals—and among them, they have garnered the lion's share of First Night Awards presented for achievement in musical theater in Nashville—and so it's pretty damn exciting for the three of them (along with musical director Paul Carrol Binkley) to be on-board for Tennessee Repertory Theatre's *Pump Boys and Dinettes*, which brings the company's 2010–11 season to a riotous, rip-roaring close!

First a hit on Broadway in 1982—and the show is set around that period, although in humor, tone, spirit and style, it is essentially timeless—the show debuted in Nashville in 1993, with Atha at the helm and Wilkinson playing the same role (she won the First Night Award as outstanding lead actress in a musical for it) she now, for all intents and purposes, owns: Rhetta Cupp, one-half of the sister duo who bake the best pies on the other side of the Smokies at the Double Cupp Diner, the fictional eatery on Highway 57, somewhere between Smyrna and Frog Level, North Carolina.

Atha choreographs and directs this new production, with Copeland (Tennessee Rep's producing artistic director) on-hand as co-director. The reunion of these three musical theater standouts guarantees that *Pump Boys and Dinettes* is gonna be a memorable experience—and I must admit, for those of us who've been around long enough to have seen so many of their stage successes, it's a sweetly sentimental trip that makes the show, which is as entertaining as all get out, pack an unexpected emotional wallop (Who knew "Closing Time" would make me all teary-eyed, for god's sake?). Between them, these three women have crafted a musical theater legacy that is awe-inspiring and which provides the foundation for, and ensures, a rich theatrical history in Nashville.

Conceived and written by John Foley, Mark Hardwick, Debra Monk (yep, that Debra Monk!), Cass Morgan, John Schimmel and Jim Wann, *Pump Boys and Dinettes* tells a down-home good time of a tale about the aforementioned Cupp sisters, Rhetta and Prudie (Wilkinson and Brooke Bryant) and the four guys who run the adjacent gas station (Jeff Boyet, Jeffrey Williams, Taylor Jones and Brad Albin).

They're the epitome of good country people, for whom a night on the town might include a trip to Woolworth's to check out the auto supplies and the pretty cashier, a concert up the road starring Miss Dolly Parton or a trip to the local ballfield for the first game of the season. In between, they're drinking a few beers, frying up some catfish and eating some mighty fine homemade pies. You know, just like the people you grew up with—well, maybe not you, but me for sure. And that may explain the continued appeal of *Pump Boys and Dinettes*: the characters are immensely likable, their stories fairly universal and the setting a picture postcard of an America now gone the way of the town-square merchants in all our Southern hometowns. That's it, y'all: *Pump Boys and Dinettes* is like the best trip back home you'll ever take!

The music's country twang is leavened by the clever lyrics and the warmth, friendliness and generosity of spirit served up by Atha's exceptionally winning ensemble cast. Over the years, I've probably reviewed at least five or six different productions of the *Pump Boys*, so I know the show pretty damn well, but walking into the Andrew Johnson Theatre at TPAC on opening night, I felt a little foggy. But as soon as the lights came up on Gary Hoff's freakin' gorgeous set, the recollections began flooding my brain and when Jim (Boyet) bid us all a hearty welcome, I knew I was back home!

And if you don't find it hard to keep yourself from moving or to refrain from singing along (don't do it, leave that to the professionals onstage, please), I really don't know what to think about you. The ensemble's performances of such spirited numbers as "Highway 57," "Drinkin' Shoes" (I dare you not to move your feet to that one!), "Vacation" and "No Holds Barred" are flat-out, slap-your-mama good.

Wilkinson is as good, or maybe even better, than she's ever been as Rhetta 2011. She has an easy onstage grace that instantly draws you in, winning you over to the charms of every character she plays. She refuses to take the easy way out, instead continuously growing as an actress and challenging both herself and her audiences with her unerring skill. Certainly, Wilkinson's played meatier roles than Rhetta Cupp, but somehow Rhetta seems to capture the very heart and soul of who she is both onstage and off. Her "Be Good or Be Gone" may be the best thing you'll hear in *Pump Boys and Dinettes*. Damn. She's good, y'all.

Brooke Bryant takes on the role of Prudie Cupp with confidence, imbuing the character with ceaseless and unyielding appeal, bringing her musical numbers to life with a vivacity that other actresses would kill to have, but which she doles out with unexpected grace. As sweet and pretty as one of those fresh-baked pies Prudie serves up at the Double Cupp, Bryant's duets with Wilkinson are terrific, particularly the bluesy, sultry "Tips" and the heartfelt "Sisters."

Jeff Boyet plays Jim, the de facto head Pump Boy, with an easy charm that makes him the perfect match for Wilkinson's Rhetta. With a certain cleancut sexiness about him and a pitch-perfect way with a musical number (his "Mamaw" is movingly heartfelt), he might even best be described as "the male Martha Wilkinson," clearly possessing the necessary attributes of versatility and focus that make him the ideal leading man. Juxtaposing his portrayal of Jim against his performances as Nashville Children's Theatre's Cat in the Hat (in *Seussical*) and as Septimus, the rakish romantic lead in Blackbird Theater's *Arcadia*, Boyet has crafted a stunning season of work. Bravo.

Making his Tennessee Rep debut, Jeffrey Williams (notable for his work in such musicals as Street Theatre Company's *Chess in Concert* and *Bat Boy the Musical* and Boiler Room Theatre's *Rent*) steals virtually every scene he's in as L.M., the quietly efficient and hardworking gas station manager. Showing his musical prowess on keyboards and the accordion (who doesn't love an accordion, I ask you), he surreptitiously steals the audience's collective heart with his understated performance, and his "T.N.D.P.W.A.M." and "Farmer Tan" are both outrageously fun.

As Jackson, the debonair and dashing ladies' man among the Pump Boys, Taylor Jones possesses an easygoing style that perfectly captures the character's personality in his Tennessee Rep debut. His second act solo on "Mona," a driving rockabilly paean to a good-looking, hard-hearted woman is one of the night's musical highlights. Brad Albin completes the sextet as the inscrutable Eddie, the Pump Boy most likely to have an Elvis Presley fixation. Wearing grease-stained coveralls, ball cap and aviators, he presented a mysterious figure among all those smiling, open-faced, good ol' boys.

You'll definitely feel at home, thanks to the stylish production Atha, Copeland, Binkley and the rest of the creative team at Tennessee Rep (which includes Hoff, costume designer Trish Clark, lighting designer Phillip Franck and technical director Tyler Axt) have waiting for you at the theater. In fact, if you don't leave TPAC in a better mood than you were in when you got there, well, shoot, you just ain't right.