

Strand Theatre Shelbyville, Inc.

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GREASE ? Preview

Written by David on March, 10 2010

Friday night features a nostalgic musical feast

America's nostalgic love affair with food, film, fun-filled music and frenzied dance will be fused into a fluent multi-sensory feast as The Strand Theatre presents its second "dinner and a movie" Friday night.

Fittingly for such a venue, this month's movie offering is "Grease", a 1978 film based on earlier Tony Award winning Broadway play of the same name and the dinner, catered by Grandma's Pancake House, features a retro-cuisine revolving around 1950's style diner food.

The dinner which cost \$20 starts at seven and movie alone (\$10) begins at 8:15. The culinary flashback menu consists of hamburgers, hotdogs, cole slaw, chips and an ice-cream sundae bar. Strand volunteers encourage those attending to dress in 1950's attire such as leather jackets, poodle skirts and the greased-back hair styles of the era. Singing along to the semi-classic songs is also highly encouraged. Tickets for both events are still available.

Conceived as retro play and then film in the 1970's "Grease," the movie is still to this day the highest grossing movie musical ever made. Its appeal spread like grease into popular culture influencing music, television and in a strange, looping way its own creators (Jim Jacobs and Warren Casey) who first rewrote the play for the silver-screen and ironically then had to rewrite the ongoing play to conform to the film version.

"It was an enormous problem when the movie came out," Jacobs said, "because we were still running on Broadway and people realized, hey, it's on stage, let's bring the kids, and suddenly there's some vulgar language and people got offended that there are teenagers portrayed onstage smoking."

"Warren and I were both perturbed about it," Jacobs said of the sanitized, suburbanized screen adaptation of what had begun as a somewhat raunchy send-up of juvenile-delinquent movies of the 1950s. The original treatment was roughly based on Jacobs' experiences at William Howard Taft High School in northwest Chicago.

Continuous royalties, however, quickly assuaged his doubts, and today he begrudgingly endorses "newer incarnations which try to get away from the heavy issues such as the suspected pregnancy or whatever . . . but the original version was heavy stuff. . . . It dealt with some real issues of the blue-collar kids in America. They were basically the outcasts."

In fact, the original rebel image fuelled by nostalgia spawned another highly successful, yet sanitized version of the Greaser subculture: the television hit "Happy Days," and its comic, greaser "Fonzie," was inspired by the Broadway play. In another irony, Henry Winkler turned down the male lead in the movie, fearing future typecasting as teen-age gang-banger.

It was however, the music of the movie which created a lasting cultural resonance, especially the title song written by Barry Gibb and sung by 1950's musical legend, Frankie Valli. The movie version, in fact, is a veritable who's who of 1950 pop-culture featuring cameos by Frankie Avalon, Shan-Na-Na and Sid Caesar, among others.

These retro-stars, however, were eclipsed by the movie's female lead Olivia Newton John who burst like a meteor across the pop charts after the movie. Previous to this role she was essentially a rather dowdy country singer, but the 29-year-old (cast as a teenager) became an overnight sensation, sex symbol and a very bankable artist in the new era of MTV videos. Semi-ironically this leading role, turned down as "too sexy" by Marie Osmond, would physically and artistically transform Newton John into a sultry siren of song for newer generation of music lovers. In particular, pay attention to the vocal satire of Sandra Dee in the movie and consider, in retrospect, Newton-John's new (post Grease) image and style.

The soundtrack of "Grease," in fact, produced two number one hits, three top five hits and the album itself stayed atop the Billboard charts for 12 consecutive weeks. In another twist of fate this musical success even convinced the male lead, John Travolta, to launch, a short, self-admittedly ill-advised career as a singer. It was Gibb (of the Bee Gees) and Valli, not Travolta, who walked away with 1979 Academy Award for Best Music: Original Song.

All ironies aside, this musical movie is cultural relic which not only crosses several social cultures, but also transcends the nostalgic memories of several generations as it campily continues to entertain both movie and stage audiences across the country today.

Images on this post:



SUBMITTED BY: TERRANCE ALDRIDGE

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