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## Rip's Diner serves up laughter by the bellyfull

By Andy Rieger For The Transcript Feb 12, 2017



Andy Rieger / For The Transcript

The cast of "Rip's Diner" sings the last number, "Always Look on the Bright Side of Life," from "Spamalot."



Just when you think James Briggs' characters can't get any more dysfunctional, the Sooner Theatre murder mystery playwright dreams up another cast of misfits played by talented community volunteers and arms them with motives, dance moves and even a few Broadway musical showstoppers. The dinner-theater, benefiting the Sooner Theatre, ended Saturday after a fun three-night run.

This year's fundraiser included brothers who own and operate Rip's Diner, a roadside cafe in desperate need of a makeover. Much-hated majority owner Coleman Brand, played by the unflappable Norman parks director and recreation director Jud Foster, agrees to the makeover if the staff can show random customer Olivia Comstock (Stephanie Royse) the royal treatment.

That VIP treatment features Briggs, in the role of Coleman's brother Randall "Rip" Brand, breaking out with "The Innkeepers Song," from "Les Miserables." Brand is truly the "Master of the House." His loving wife, Carol (Shirley Franklin), is pushing for the makeover in hopes of showing her singing and dancing talents, also displayed in this number. Earlier, the audience was treated to "Comedy Tonight" by the whole cast.

Devious diner employees Vince Conway and Sunny Felton (Anthony Wilkinson and Regan Schreier) are battling to take over the diner in the untimely event of Coleman's demise. "Anything You Can Do I Can Do Better," from "Annie Get Your Gun," is a first-act hit.

Ether Aura (Kathy Nees), as the local artist with a past relationship with Coleman, seems too peaceful to be a killer. An annual favorite, Nees shines singing "When the Idle Poor Become the Idle Rich." Truckers Gabe and Tina Snyder and Dirk Porter (Ben Odom, Gail Blaylock and Craig Rice) have motives, too.

Now, with a body in the lake, scratch marks on his neck, some muddy footprints, it's up to Sheriff Cleary (Leesa Stewart) and Agent Dealy (Jolly Brown) to figure out who drowned the inebriated Coleman in a farm pond during an overnight thunderstorm. Meanwhile, Dirk, the lonesome trucker, romances Coleman's niece, Lucy Morrow (Jandi Bieler), a likely heir.

Sooner executive director Jennifer Baker teamed up with Whitney Young on the choreography, while musical director/pianist John Morrow lead Kurt Snodgrass, John Sumida, Craig Price and Hayden Lane. (Drummer Snodgrass was paying attention as rimshots accelerated the laughs on the rare occasion of missed lines.) Tab Brit served as sound engineer.

Benvenuti's Ristorante provided a delicious dinner. Republic Bank, longtime Sooner partner, provided the servers and cleanup crew.

The show benefits the theater's year-round programs. More than 900 students took classes at Sooner Theatre last year. Concerts and shows drew 15,000 guests. Even in tough funding times, the theater gave \$40,000 in student scholarships.

Writer Briggs' day job is working alongside Foster at the city's parks and recreation department. The pair and others on the city parks and recreation staff keep the nearly 90-year-old theater building operating. Foster, in his 11th murder mystery performance, somehow keeps Briggs employed, even after ending up as the victim in multiple shows.

Between the murder mystery acts, the cast members shook down the audience, trading a few clues for theater cash. Our Friday night table correctly pegged the blame on Ether Aura after some costly but worthwhile clues.

After Sheriff Cleary ruled out the other suspects one by one and pinned the crime on Aura, the cast broke into the crowd favorite "Always Look On The Bright Side of Life" from "Spamalot." It was an uplifting end to an entertaining and eclectic show that pulled a full menu of special songs that all seem to fit the script.

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