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RIVERSIDE CENTER'S 'BYE BYE BIRDIE' FLIES HIGH

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By Margaret Lawrence

FOR THE FREE LANCE-STAR

"Bye Bye Birdie" may be a little gray around the muzzle in its comic depiction of screaming teeny-boppers and romantic antics, but there's one line that brings it home with a thud.

When Conrad Birdie's ambitious manager, Albert Peterson, finds himself on "The Ed Sullivan Show," Rose Alvarez has had it. "You're not alone," she snipes before stalking out. "You're on television!"

We don't wear circle skirts and bobby socks anymore, but this parody of a nation obsessed with its own media image couldn't have been more prescient.

Director Stephen Hayes has turned Riverside Center Dinner Theater's candy-colored "Bye Bye Birdie" into an act of love. Call it "Sweet Grease." While it acknowledges the forgivably foolish givens (celebrity worship, peer pressure, generational tensions), the good-natured innocence with which they are handled makes this 1960 hit refreshingly entertaining. And if Rose's hopeful paeon to the joys of being Mrs. Albert Peterson jar modern sensibilities, we're also modern enough to understand context.

Writer Mike Stewart saw a gold mine in the hysteria created by Elvis Presley's induction into the Army, and so Conrad Birdie was born. As a publicity stunt before he ships out, the ever-sharp Rose comes up with a plan. A lucky fan's name will be drawn to receive the "One Last Kiss" of Birdie's civilian life. That girl is Kim MacAfee of (can you stand it?) Sweet Apple, Ohio.

Along the way, Kim will fight with her boyfriend, Rose will walk out on Albert after dueling with his mother, and Harry ("You dare to say 'puberty' in front of your father?") MacAfee will fight--ineffectually--with everybody. Through it all, Conrad Birdie will sing, dance and strike poses, a living monument to teenage libido.

There's a line between good-humored parody and disdainful satire, and Hayes never crosses it. His own embodiment of Harry MacAfee echoes Paul Lynde's characterization in the 1963 film, and rather than a slavish copy, is an affectionate tribute--and very funny.

Christopher Stewart is tasked with the role of Albert Peterson, a mild, indecisive man with all the sex appeal of Howdy Doody. How he got to manage Conrad Birdie is one for the philosophers, and why Rose adores him is her secret, though she reveals more than she knows in "What Did I See in Him?" But the key to Albert is Mae, the Mother of all Jewish Mothers, in a brilliant, guilt-framed portrayal by Barbara Cochran. "I have a condition," she sadly informs her son, laying one gloved hand on her heart. "Doctors can't cure a condition."

Nevertheless, it is Vilma Gil who steals the show as Rose--loyal secretary, woman scorned, hot tamale on the town. A strong singer and dazzling dancer, Gil's stage persona bounces off the walls. When Albert stands between Rose and Mae, we begin to understand his problem.

Julie Olson creates a fresh, uncomplicated Kim, who gets the kiss (no thanks to the jealous Hugo, nicely played by Joshua Hardcastle). Norman Howard as Conrad Birdie has the moves and most of the look, though a certain maturity of hairline and body suggest a man beyond draft age.

Billy Smith's vivacious choreography works with the talents of the dancers. Group numbers employing well-matched teens harken to the best of jitterbug. Albert and "sad girl" Kristin Morris are a delight in "Put On A Happy Face." But Albert and Rose in the final number dance with the grace of figure-skating champions.

Gregg Hillmar's set design reinforces a well-established tone. Record motifs outline the stage, where colors are bright, but not garish, and the outline of suburban homes, merely suggested by piping, dispenses with any more reality than is needed. Phil Carlucci's sweet-hued lighting is complementary, and Debbie Olson's color-coordinated costumes focus on the sleekest elements of late-'50s fashion.

Though placid optimism would be followed by a decade that couldn't outrun it fast enough, "Birdie" has been a favorite on community stages for more than 40 years. High-flying productions like this one are the key.

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