

School's in session in 'Greater Tuna'

BY KEVIN RYAN

DAILY REPUBLIC CORRESPONDENT

FAIRFIELD — It's a sizzling, sweaty, late-summer Texas day in not-so-mythical Greater Tuna; the third smallest town in Texas and a breeding school for bigotry.

Sobering and silly in its narrow-mindedness, Tuna is a town that applauds high school essays such as "Human Rights - Why Bother" and bans "Roots" for "only showing one side of the slavery issue."

Written in 1984 and masterfully presented at Missouri Street Theatre, "Greater Tuna" balances biting satire and comedic wit with almost respectful affection. The audience feasts on a Tuna casserole comprised of the lives of 20 of Greater Tuna's citizens - all played by only two male actors.

The play starts out with the hysterical morning broadcast of Thurston and Arles on Tuna's own Radio Station, OKKK, with its measly 275 watts. In Tuna, it's OK to have a radio station trumpeting the Ku Klux Klan, whose trifling wattage amply illuminates the dim thinking of townsfolk.

Through a cavalcade of hilarious and pathetic characters, we embrace small-town scurrilous scandals, fumbling foibles and sincere but pathetic self-styled dramas. It's a town where the Tasty Freeze tootsies, Inida Goodwin and Helen Bedd, schlep haute cuisine just across from the Piggly Wiggly.

During two acts and 12 scenes with dizzying costume changes, we pop in for breakfast, watch a hilarious interview for "Intellect" magazine, (a periodical that will never grace Tuna's libraries), sit agog at the insane doings of a strychnine-slinging canine killer whose plans go awry and cruise by the overpass and bemoan how hobos under the bridge are making it so there is nowhere fit to throw your garbage.

We are then enjoined to pick up a cheap used weapon sure to kill something, uncover a funny yet evil act of revenge and commiserate with a perpetually rejected portly teenage cheerleader wannabee. We even take a serious moment for sincere prayer

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Preview

"Greater Tuna"

Solano Repertory Company
and Benicia Old Town Theatre
Group

Missouri Street Theatre,
1125 Missouri St., Suite 100,
Fairfield - 8 p.m. Fridays and
Saturdays and 4 p.m.
Sundays, through Oct. 21.
422-1598

Benicia Old Town Theatre,
140 West J St., Benicia - 8
p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, 4
p.m. Sundays, Oct. 27-Nov.
18. 746-1269

\$15 adults, \$12 students
and seniors on Sundays, \$20
opening night in Benicia.

★★★★ (OUT OF FOUR)

Richard Ryan and James Brewer inhabit 20 characters in the two-man play "Greater Tuna"

Mike McCoy/Daily Republic

Under the true-to-script clever direction of David Lagle, a seasoned Screen Actors Guild and Actors Equity Association member, we watch precision-crafted characterizations by wiry, plastic-faced James Brewer and the "oh-so-comfortable in my own skin" portly Yogi Bearish Richard Ryan crystallize and project the essence of 20 Tuna townsfolk.

We are schooled in the mindset of a book burner, a juvenile delinquent, a cliché-spouting reverend, a pathetic lovable leader of the humane society, a jilted ex-lover of a newly deceased hanging judge found dead in a Dale Evans Swimsuit and a Mogen-David wine-sucking fiddler who

swears he sees UFOs shaped like chalupah.

These are not cardboard characters, as Brewer and Ryan craft townsfolk with depth and aching hearts born of ignorance and easy unwise decisions.

Set, sound and lighting are simple, convincingly well executed and do not distract from the key focus of how Tuna-headed minds, or lack thereof, work. Costumes and props by Sylvia Gregory, especially considering the split-second changes, are on target, hitting the character and the funny bone equally well.

Greater Tuna is a community theater staple.

However, it is more. It is a window to small-mindedness complete with pursed-lipped, vigilante smut-snatchers and swaggering self-impressed pseudo sheriffs. Trust me, when you encounter the evil fish eye of Vera Carp, the Tuna patron of piety and prejudice and chief smut snatcher, well, it'll drop you dead in your tracks.

"Greater Tuna" uses caricatures and humor to point out the foibles and flaws to which we all can fall prey. Furthermore, the many costumes and character changes in "Greater Tuna" remind us that small mindedness and bigotry is always in our wardrobe. Only the

cut of the cape, the drape of the fabric or the length of the hem change, while the fundamental ensemble of bigotry and fruits of poor education remain unaltered.

Inarguably funny and entertaining, "Greater Tuna" is at times more of a Great White shark, brandishing razor sharp teeth in jaws of ignorance with single-minded purpose. I urge readers to bring the family and put some of the timeless lessons amicably showcased in this production into heads and hearts.

Kevin Ryan is a retired colonel, physician, musician and author who lives in Fairfield.