

Of Baptist choirs in North Carolina...

"Smoke" an entertaining revival



By Anas Ben-Musa
The Battalion

"Smoke on the Mountain"
Written by Alan Bailey
Starring Steven De Korne, M.A. Sterling, Christina Vela O'Conner, Jessica Lowe, Jenny Barbour
Directed by Robert Wenck
Playing at Rudder Forum, tickets available at Rudder Box Office

MSC Summer Dinner Theater's production of Alan Bailey's "Smoke on the Mountain" is an appetizing morsel of music and comedy. Poking fun at the Baptist religion, "Smoke on the Mountain" is set in a small Baptist church in Mount Pleasant, North Carolina. The year is 1938.

Pastor Mervin Oglethorpe, played by Steven De Korne, invites the Sanders clan, a local family known for their singing, to perform a concert at the church to bring the congregation into the 20th century. That's about it for plot.

On a whole, the narrative is rather vague and surprisingly unimportant.

Throughout the play, the Sanders family sings many spiritual songs. "Smoke" makes up for its lack of plot and story with a sensational cast of singers and some wonderfully humorous songs.

On "I'll Never Die (I'll Just Change My Address)," Denise Sanders, played by Kristi Cobern, does a rendition of Michelle Pfeiffer's "Fabulous Baker Boys" piano scene. Of course, her family is horrified by her lewd behavior and tries to cover up the situation.

Director Robert Wenck creates an atmosphere that allows the audience to familiarize themselves with the characters.

In "Smoke," the audience is the church congregation. Each character talks directly to the audience and sometimes interacts with them.

Coincidentally, Wenck directed the last MSC Dinner Theater production, "Talley's Folly." He used the same familiarization method in the beginning of "Talley" to introduce the characters.

Throughout the play, the pastor and Vera Sanders, portrayed by Christina Vela O'Conner, compete against one another. Each time someone quotes from the Bible, the pastor and Vera try to out due each other by stating where the quotes are from.

Yet, the best scene of the play is Vera's witness in the second act. She begins to describe humanity as a june bug flying around aimlessly.

But, with a string attached (Jesus Christ) to the bug, it can be held



DARRIN HILL/The Battalion

Heath Allyn and M.A. Sterling sing "Meet Mother in the Skies," with the rest of the Sanders Family in the background, played by Mike Whiteside, Christina Vela O'Conner, Kristi Cobern, and Stephanie White.

down and fly in circles around God's head. Immediately, after Vera shows that bug flying around her head in circles as Baptists do around God's head, the bug falls on her arm and Vera goes crazy. She slaps it away and begins to stomp on the poor insect.

These scenes leave the audience rolling down the pews.

Furthermore, the musical harmony of the whole family was extraordinary. M.A. Sterling, who plays the father of the family, was also the Music Director of the play. Sterling did a wonderful job spicing up the songs.

Perhaps the only fault of the play is its length. Wenck should have cut out at least one or two songs in each act. After a certain point, I felt the play was trying to convert the audience rather than entertain.

Yet, this was a minor flaw. The MSC Dinner Theater's "Smoke on the Mountain" delivers some delicious music and comedy. Get your handkerchiefs out because you will be crying with laughter.

Tickets are available at the Rudder Box Office. For information, call 845-1234. The play finishes this Sunday.

Bargains abound for savvy summer traveler

By Tricia Martinez
The Battalion

Community residents are taking over the sky this summer as air fare wars rage. Lower rates this summer make traveling to exotic places affordable and has considerably increased competition between travel agencies.

Sonya Bruce, travel agent for Executive Travel, said the summer began with a bang when airlines lowered their rates in late May.

"People were coming out of the woodwork," Bruce said. "People who have never flown before decided they were going to fly. It was just crazy."

"We were working 10 to 11 hour days seven days a week," she said.

The airlines lowered their rates around May 25, and did not raise them back to regular prices until June 5.

Mitzie Bryant, co-owner of Dog Gone Travel, described the situation as "hell-week."

"We could not answer the phones and we had to lock the doors to keep people out because we ran out of room," Bryant said. "I have my phones transferred to my home and the phone started ringing at 5 a.m. It was a disaster."

Some travel agencies said it was one of the best summer sales ever as agencies sold up to 10 times the

usual amount of air tickets. Bryant said people were traveling everywhere and anywhere they could get tickets.

Regardless of the hassles and people flocking into the agencies sending the agents into hysteria one thing is still continuing to happen — traveling.

Brewer, who handles group travel, tries to target students. Brewer said Mexico was the most popular place to go among college students this summer.

"It's cheap and they have a good time," Brewer said. "We offer packages for all budgets, so there is usually something in there the students can afford."

Many of the agencies attempt to really cater to their customers by searching for a better deal when they hear someone is offering a trip at a lower price.

"If someone comes in and says they can get a better deal somewhere else I try my best to match it or beat it," Brewer said. "I try to go the extra mile and find a great deal."

Brewer said more business circulates through the agencies during the summer than any other time of year because children are out of school and most people want to travel during summer months.

Guin Kesner, travel consultant for Aggeland Travel Inc., said a Cancun vacation was the most popular trip they sold.

Kesner said she is disappointed in the airlines

because they don't work as much with the customers since the price cuts.

"Most airlines have now discontinued senior citizens rates, will not refund tickets," Kesner said. "It could have been handled better by the airlines."

Brewer said other popular vacation sites this summer are Disneyland, Disneyworld and Las Vegas.

"Families are the main ones going to the Disneyland and Disneyworld," Brewer said. "Parent know they can take their kids there and have a great time."

Middle age vacationers, on the other hand, tend to venture off toward Las Vegas for the gambling scene, while many of the area singles hit South Padre Island.

"We don't just deal with air fare," Brewer said. "We set up hotel reservations, car rentals and any other accommodation we can."

Kesner said that cruises and Europe were very big this summer, especially with lower rates offered. "People enjoy the cruise because everything is included in your package except for alcoholic beverages," Kesner said.

Europe was more popular than usual this year," she said. "It's harder to get in to Europe this year with the Olympics going on, where as last year

people were scared to go due to the war. You just never know what's going to happen next to make people want to go or stay away from some place."

The three agencies want students to use them, but they don't necessarily cater to them at all times.

Bryant and Kesner's agencies decided against setting up a package for the Pigskin Classic because they did not feel it would be utilized. Brewer, on the other hand, did her homework and came up with a package that appealed to 90 Aggies.

"It should be a lot of fun," Brewer said. "Group rates are always lower and so many people wanted to go on the trip and there wasn't enough room for everyone. I felt bad, but I had to turn people away."

Turning people away is only one of many drawbacks the agents face. They deal constantly with the public and undergo public abuse regularly.

"Even though we are not at fault if something goes wrong with the trip, the customer doesn't go to the airlines or the hotel managers, they come to us," Kesner said.

All agents agreed that there is another side — benefits. Those include discounted air fares and even free trips for major bookings. Some of the agents said they are traveling somewhere to relax at least once a month.

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