

New Soquel theater opens with a hit — 'On the Air'

By ANN BENNETT
STAFF THEATER CRITIC

A GLITTERING ARRAY OF local talent lit up the stage of the new West Abbey Theatre in Soquel on opening night and romped through a wildly entertaining production of "On The Air," a musical radio revue made up of familiar nostalgia from the 30s and 40s.

Producer Abbey Goss-Wilkerson has created a warm intimate setting in the big old infamous movie house by the use of cabaret style seating, with tables and directors' chairs arranged on

theater

raked levels. Not only does this create a mellow mood, but it also provides for unsurpassed viewing visibility. The theater itself boasts a particularly large and versatile stage area and must be a real delight for the cast.

"On The Air" is pure entertainment, without even the remnant of a plot to distract from the fun. It is made up of singing, dancing, and radio skits that combine lavish costumes, clever staging, and most of all an immense amount of talent for a totally enjoyable evening.

Director/Choreographer Leslie Gambelin utilizes the stage well and takes advantage of its spaciousness. The production moves along at a good clip yet manages the constant transition almost casually, allowing time to savor the joke of the moment. Various levels on the stage permit lots of background reinforcement to the main action, and Gambelin doesn't miss a chance to double the fun.

As star Buddy Begonia, Kelley Houston is clearly the star of the show. An inveterate scene stealer, Houston sings, dances, and mainly hams it up as an old-time radio show host. He wraps up the audience from his opening lines to his last bow



The singing Starbright Sisters, Betsy Fitzmaurice, Lizz Hodgkin and Ann Herring

and there's no doubt that this show is his throughout.

Houston's supporting cast reads about like a cross-section of the best of Santa Cruz theater of the last five years. West Abbey Theatre has drawn actors from almost every aspect of the local theater scene and this in itself makes the show an especially pleasing event. These are dedicated dramatists who have long desired a real

theater in which to work, and the spirit of their camaraderie is apparent.

The incomparable Lesley-Anne Hallam sizzles as movie queen Lana Lamarr, takes advantage of this opportunity to put her entire array of talent into action. Hallam dances, clowns, and sings with flair; her torchy musical interpretation is sultry and funny at once and when she dances there's no tomorrow. Her stage presence is always obvious

and she is a hit even when she's clowning in the background.

Bruce Fairbairn as a hooper and Joe MacDonald as a rising star are two of the best talents on the market today. Not only do they dance up a storm, but they both can sing and act as well. MacDonald's fine sense of mimicry and Fairbairn's gentle intuitive humor are always at work; the two complement each other well.

Versatile Barbara Patterson-Taylor creates a witty characterization of Louhedda Hopson, gossip columnist, and gives her fine voice free reign in a couple of great numbers. Patrice Houts and Dan Barnett pair off as talented staff and both come up with some grand surprises. Jon Cirvetz does a fine comic routine as the announcer and adds a lot of other tricks to his repertoire.

The Starbright Sisters, Ann Herring, Lizz Rodgin and Betsy Fitzmaurice are not only an ensemble delight but each of them provides additional bits of comedy throughout the evening. Individually or together they are hilarious.

Costumes by Cynthia Nisson are especially fine and set design by Kurt Meeker is appropriate to the action. Music by Bob Hathaway, Peter Wilder, Danielle Dowers and Scott Nordgren is uniformly good — they handle that 40s music as though they were born to it!

"On The Air" is strictly for laughs. It is made up of such familiar fare that even those in the audience who are too young to remember the golden age of radio can relate to it (as they say). The patter and the songs are classic, and the clever vignettes of "The Shadow" and "The Lone Ranger" are diabolically funny.

The West Abbey Theater is off to a rousing start with a fine show. Santa Cruz has been without an adequate professional theater for too long. I am sure glad to see that a dream finally seems to have a chance of becoming a reality.

"On The Air" continues Friday and Saturday nights with Sunday matinees through the end of February. For ticket information, phone 476-SHOW.

REFERENCE

Industry to 1990