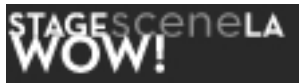


## PRAIRIE-OKE!



Any resemblance between the show being reviewed here and a certain TV series that ran from 1974 to 1983 on NBC and starred Michael Landon, Melissa Gilbert, and Karen Grassle as a family living on a farm in Walnut Grove, Minnesota in the 1870s and 1880s is “entirely coincidental,” as Silverlake’s Cavern Club Celebrity Theater welcomes back master parodist Dane Whitlock’s *Prairie-oke!*, aka “That Totally Unauthorized Karaoke Parody Musical Formerly Known As Something Else.”

Like Whitlock’s previous *Are You There God? It’s Me, Karen Carpenter*, *Prairie-oke!* pays affectionate tongue-in-cheek tribute to its 1970s source, mashing it up with hit songs, double entendres, and the one-and-only Drew Droege in drag.

*Prairie-oke!* satirizes the abovementioned NBC series’ Season Six opener, sticking closely (albeit *absolutely unintentionally*) to its storyline, one that relates our teenage heroine’s first meeting with the handsome lad she ends up marrying in Season Seven, explains how her lifelong nemesis unintentionally serves the town newcomer cinnamon chicken spiced with cayenne pepper (cooked by our heroine), and reveals how said nemesis then gets her revenge by deliberately sabotaging our heroine’s history exam.

You don’t have to be TV buff to fall in love with *Prairie-oke!*, nor is it necessary to have seen even one episode of the series that dare not speak its name here for fear of legal repercussions (though rearranging the words prairie & on & house & little & the might give you a hint). Still, knowing trivia tidbits like the fact that CBS had a similarly themed G-rated series running simultaneously will help you get the jokes, as when the family portrait that begins the show gets accidentally backed-up by the theme song from—you guessed it—*The Waltons*.

The characters onstage may bear a striking similarity to those you’ve known and loved, but their names (Lauren Pringalls, her siblings *Alfred*, *Merry*, and *Kerry*, that evil bitch *Mellie Moleson*, and heartthrob schoolteacher *Alonzo Wildest*) are *absolutely* different, and if Almond Grove, the Minnesota prairie town they call home, might accidentally remind audiences of a town called *Walnut Grove*, well there’s probably also a *Peanut Grove* and a *Cashew Grove* and a *Hazelnut Grove* somewhere in the Land Of 10,000 Lakes.

But on with our story.

It’s the Pringalls kids’ first day back at school and Lauren’s been teasing her brother about his primping for Miss Wildest, the new schoolteacher with whom he’s already smitten. As for baby Kerry, she’s so excited she’s already been to the outhouse four times this morning.

On the way to school, the Pringalls run into Mellie’s nelly dad Mr. Moleson, who’s busy with construction, just him “and the men in the heat...with some wood...drilling things,” and he assures Lauren that they’re gonna be finished today even if his wife Marriett “has to beat the workers with a whip.” Ouch!

The Pringalls youngins’ first day at school is soon interrupted by the arrival of Mrs. Moleson

and Mellie, whose reward for graduating early turns out to be the restaurant her father and his he-men workers have been building, the soon-to-be-christened Mellie's Hotel & Restaurant. Now all they need is someone to do the cooking.

Later that day, Lauren meets her teacher Miss Wildest's handsome young brother Alonzo, whom Lauren immediately dubs "Studly," though when he learns that her nickname is "Half Cup," he opts to call her "Bess" instead. (Any resemblance to that TV series' "Manly," "Half Pint," and "Beth" is once again inadvertent I'm sure.)

It turns out that Lauren is not the only one with a crush on Alonzo. Mellie's hot for the hottie hunk as well, and invites him to dine at her restaurant, the only catch being that she has no idea how to make his favorite dish, cinnamon chicken. Enter Lauren to do the cooking and spice it up with more than a pinch of cayenne!

Anyone who thinks that Mellie is going to take this lying down does not know the town's most spoiled brat. No indeedy, they do not know Mellie Moleson. But they soon will. You can bet on it.

Creator-writer-director Whitlock keeps Prairie-oke! jam-packed with one-liners. Some of them have a wink-wink quality that TV buffs will get, as when Mellie quips about someone living on another network, "I mean, I just can't get past that guy John Boy and his mole." Then there are the jokes that could never have gotten past the NBC censors, as when Mellie tattles that she saw Lauren and Alonzo "fu-kissing" and a shocked Pa replies, "You saw them fu-kissing?"

As for political correctness, throw all thought of that aside, at least where poor sightless Merry is concerned. Take for instance Pa's insistence that he can't call his oldest child by a nickname "because she's *blind*. She'll think I'm talking about someone else." And just wait till Merry's big dance number, performed to the theme from that Robby Benson movie classic about a blind ice skater.

Along the way there are plenty more pop songs, some of them by 21st Century idols like Miley, Katie, and Carly Rae, others of them '70s and '80s smashes by a diamond named Neil, a youthful MC, an invincible female rocker, and pop groups like the one named after a bomber and another with a name that's a palindrome—all of the above featuring Joseph Corella's bouncy choreography.

As for the cast (which includes many Karen Carpenter returnees), they could hardly be better than Libby Baker's perpetually perky Lauren or **Matthew Herrmann's splendidly spunky Alfred** or Sydney Blair's outrageously incomprehensible Kerry. Rae Dawn Hadinger (Merry) has done her Miracle Worker homework to hilarious perfection, Frances Chewing has the wildest time playing Miss Wildest, and Jennifer Blake and Mark Rowe do their own scene-stealing as Ma and Pa. Amy Procacci and Brad Griffith are a double hoot as Marriett Moleson and her man-crazy hubby Mels. As for Lauren's beloved (and aptly named) "Studly," Tom Lowe shows off considerable comedic skills in addition to those American Idol pipes. (Joe Donohoe plays Alonzo at certain performances.) Finally, there would be no Prairie-oke! without the one-and-only Droege, dragtastic once again as the most monstrous child since Bad Seed Rhoda.

Adding to the evening's enjoyment is its venue, downstairs in the basement theater of Casita

De Campo Mexican restaurant, where audience members are encouraged to carry down their cocktails from the upstairs bar, *Prairie-oke!* being all the funnier with a Margarita or two in you. JT Seaton handles the light and sound, while Whitlock, Harriet Whitlock, and Palm Canyon Theatre have provided sets, props, and costumes, with special snaps for the latter.

*Prairie-oke!* is produced by Joseph Chianese and Vickie Mendoza and stage managed by Megan Evanich.

Though I've never seen more than a few clips of the NBC series with which *Prairie-oke!* shares *entirely coincidental* similarities, I couldn't have had a more delightful time with Lauren and Mellie and the rest of the gang. Succinctly put, *Prairie-oke!* is *Prairie-okey-dokey* by me.

Cavern Club Theatre, Casita del Campo, 1920 Hyperion Ave., Los Angeles.

-Steven Stanley August 16, 2013