

The Shuler delivers laughs and a *Clue*

By **Tim Keller**
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RATON — The Shuler Theater closes its summer repertory season each year with a youth musical that has proven to be instrumental in building Raton's deep talent pool for year-round theatrical productions. This year, producer Bill Fegan and director Gail Dixon-Willden determined that since half a dozen of their older students had progressed beyond the younger kids that it was time to add a high school musical to the calendar. Last weekend's opening of "Clue the Musical" proved the creative team right. The company will provide a final performance Thursday night.

If you've enjoyed playing the board game Clue and think it might make a fun play, this production is for you. If not — you'll be pleasantly surprised. While the elements of the board game are intact — one murder, six suspects, six weapons, six rooms — the fun is in the performances: The kids are having a ball. And they're good.

Performers enjoying themselves and superior quality are characteristic of director Willden's work. Actors speak of her like a beloved den mother and her rehearsals like a house party. In her 101st directorial outing, she's trained her actors to mastery. Far more important, she's trained them to be free and to have fun. This was especially apparent in Friday night's show when glitches turned into treasures because of hilarious and effective improvisation. The young actors didn't miss a beat.

The same applied to the songs and the singing, which were overseen by first-time musical director Rebecca Clark and accompanied on piano by Carol Simmons at the side of the stage — where she surprised the audience by becoming a part of the play. Singing abilities, of course, varied, and Willden's past choreography and musical direction were missed, but the performances were no less impressive: The kids sang fearlessly and let their imperfections add to the fun.

Costuming these archetypal characters from the board game looks to have been great fun for the actors and for costumer Ursula Garcia. Ila Raine Medina vamped with relish in Miss Scarlet's grownup red

dress, and Kate Little's birdlike portrayal of Mrs. Peacock couldn't have been better, aided by a deep-blue dress and hat and abundant jewelry.

Nathan Coleman's host, Mr. Boddy, benefitted from Coleman's extensive stage experience: He was self-assured and comfortable enough to improvise at will — a perfect host. After Mr. Boddy's death midway through the play, he simply rose, sang about his demise and continued hosting. He explained, "Don't feel bad: I live to be killed."

Joshua Alcorn, as Mr. Green, had the best voice, a welcome deep baritone among the more youthful-sounding voices. Most of the suspects got solo turns, but the big fun came in the many ensemble pieces that erupted in six-part harmony. The level of fun was conveyed by the song titles, including, "Foul Weather Friend," "Don't Blame Me," "She Hasn't Got a Clue" and "Everyday Devices" — the latter referring to the possible murder weapons.

Newcomer Ashya Gertler had some catching up to do as her detective had trouble joining in the fun, but little 7th grader Spenser Willden had enough stage experience to thoroughly entertain as Professor Plum. A dance duet brought giddy audience laughter when Willden danced on a platform to be at Gertler's height. A second middle-schooler drafted for this production, Johnny Gentry, is another veteran of youth theater: Even when his Mr. Mustard dropped some lines, his huge smile made it work.

Clair Willden played the cook, Mrs. White, with a Cockney accent, even while singing "Life is a Bowl of Pits." As with the older students here — Medina, Little, and Coleman — Willden's stage experience showed.

The script and the cast had fun working in playful references to other famous board games, including Sorry, Life, Parcheesi and, of course, Monopoly. There's at least one political jab when the detective tells Mr. Green that he is "a robber, a conniver and a snake," to which Mr. Green defensively replies, "I am a Republican!"

The country would be in much better shape if all of its youths spent their evenings as these talented kids spend theirs.



Host Mr. Boddy, (top) played by Nathan Coleman, reckons with his latest girlfriend, Mrs. Peacock, played by Kate Little, in "Clue the Musical" at the Shuler Theater.

Ila Raine Medina (middle) brings song and hilarity to the role of Miss Scarlet in the high school musical based on the board game Clue: "Clue the Musical."

The six suspects gather to sing, complete with weapons (bottom), as host Mr. Boddy lies lifeless on the stage apron in the Shuler Theater production of "Clue the Musical." From left are Clair Willden, Kate Little, Spenser Willden, Joshua Alcorn, Ila Raine Medina, Johnny Gentry and Nathan Coleman.

The final performance of "Clue the Musical" arrives on the Shuler Theater stage Thursday at 7:30 p.m. General admission tickets are \$15 for adults, \$13 for seniors and \$5 for children. Information is available at the Shuler Theater: (575) 445-4746.



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