



# ROSSMOOR NEWS

WALNUT CREEK, CALIFORNIA

---

## **“The Spitfire Grill”**

*By Charles Jarrett*

“The Spitfire Grill” is a heartwarming musical

I am happy to report that I had the opportunity to see of two outstanding and heartwarming productions - “The Spitfire Grill” in Walnut Creek and “Bolerios for the Disenchanted” in San Francisco.

The Contra Costa Christian Theatre's “The Spitfire Grill” is a story about people and personalities. It's a personal tragedy that brought an old Wisconsin town a new face, new life, new hope and within a short time, forgiveness and rejuvenation. The Contra Costa Christian Theatre strives to produce plays and musicals with a good moral message. Director Kimberly James has struck gold with an excellent show, producing a great story with a superb cast - with outstanding voices, and great musical accompaniment. She takes a real gem of a story and polishes it into a resplendent jewel. This show will make your heart glow.

When the story opens, Percy Talbott (Laurie Kinsella) is about to be released on parole following a five-year prison term. Having grown up in the grey squalor and black and white strife of life in coal mining towns, abused and put through terrific pain by an abusive stepfather and an ineffective mother, Percy has longed for a new life, a new start, in a totally new environment. While in prison, she tore a page from a travel magazine that illustrated pictorially the exquisitely quiet pastoral beauty and rich fall colors near the little town of Gilead, Wis. As an ex-convict, she travels north by bus to the miniscule rural town she had so often dreamed about.

She has to a local parole officer, who in this case, is Gilead's one and only policeman, Sheriff Joe Sutter (Nephi Speer). Knowing of only one possibility for employment, he delivers Percy to the town's one remaining restaurant, the Spitfire Grill, and introduces her to the little restaurant's tough and careworn owner, Hannah Ferguson (Ann Kendrick).

The story of an ex-convict starting over is certainly not new, or unique, but the development of the characters of everyone in town provides this story with its heartwarming and fulfilling promise. From the acerbic, gossip-generating postmistress

and general store operator, Effy Krayneck (Nathalie Archangel), to the tough, gruff and occasionally motherly Hannah, to her abusive, male chauvinist control-freak son Caleb (Richard Howarter), to his mousy and subservient wife, Shelby (Steph Peek), to the mysterious visitor (Bill Dietz), this story is about people, how they can contribute and how they can change, if they are motivated to do so.

Most of all, it is about how a total stranger with a deeply troubling past manages to rebuff the town's small mindedness and turn the town around, awakening and re-defining its new heart.

When Hannah suffers an injury from a fall, Percy takes over the grill, or attempts to. The sheriff encourages Hannah to employ her daughter-in-law, Shelby, to work for the grill, at least temporarily, to get through the emergency. Shelby does go to work for the grill over her husband's strenuous objections and in a short time she and Percy become good friends. Together they begin to bring new life to the Spitfire Grill. The show has a surprise ending that is believable and uplifting.

Every actor contributes significantly, uniquely to the overall richness of this story. It is hard to pick out favorites because this is truly a masterful ensemble production. Everybody "done good!" The voices are superb, the music is memorable and the lyrics echo the underlying messages that electrify and resonate with the audience. Much like a penny opera, the songs and lyrics meld continuously into the story, adding to the beauty of the piece.

I have to mention the incredible set designed by Tom Matousek with special touches by Director Kimberly James. This is one of the most delightfully artistic sets that I have yet see in this small venue. Also, the musicians, Brian Roberts (keyboards), Marjorie McWee (mandolin), Kerry Borgen (violin) and Joshua Mikus-Mahoney (Cello) are a perfect addition to the production. Josh Mahoney filled in for Gretchen Egan, who had another commitment during this particular evening's production.