



UA's SummerTide has become a beachside tradition

By Mark Hughes Cobb / Staff Writer

Posted May 27, 2018 at 8:00 AM

As beach towns go, Gulf Shores plays it cool, even in summer's heat. Oh there are tacky T-shirt shacks, over-amped cars cruising, and on sunny days, bronzed bodies covered only by coconut oil and the barest strips of fabric. Visitors can ride go-carts, splash through a water park, or visit the zoo, or wildlife refuges. Miles west, guests can walk the ruins of Fort Morgan, built in the aftermath of the War of 1812. The more adventurous can parasail or go deep-sea fishing, ride waverunners or emulate skydiving.

Restaurants dot the area, from your standard chains to more home-grown spots like the open-air Lulu's, created by the sister of Jimmy Buffett — they grew up around these parts — and dive bars like the gaudy Pink Pony Pub. Goofy golf, hiking trails, wildlife. ... It's not really all that wild, Gulf Shores, not overly populated, little in the way of shady nightlife. No one's going to write a coked-up crime drama called "Gulf Shores Vice."

It's a family destination, generally, built up and around private residences, many dating back to days when tourists generally rolled down to Panama City Beach, or Pensacola. Even with the just-past Hangout Festival, and its annual fall shrimp festival, Gulf Shores remains that stretch of sugar-white sands where you can see familiar faces, year after year.

SummerTide's made itself at home in Gulf Shores' George C. Meyer Performing Arts Theatre for 15 years now, and beach residents and visitors alike have come to anticipate the University of Alabama Department of Theatre and Dance's five-week professional run.

"There are definitely a lot of repeats," said Miranda Therkelsen, who's about to start her third summer there. "It's a really small theater, but word has spread throughout the community. So if people come once, they tend to come every year."

For its 15th summer, UA chose to return to the show it began with back in 2004, the little homespun musical that could, “Pump Boys and Dinettes.” The musical-comedy’s essentially a friendship come to life, as the writer-creators built it about their own experiences, working day jobs, playing and singing together at nights. Originally a two-person show, it evolved into an off-Broadway and eventually Tony-nominated Broadway run with four gas-pump jockeys — Jim, Jackson, L.M. and Eddie — flirting and dancing with neighbors at the Double Cupp Diner, sisters Rhetta and Prudie Cupp. They’re situated in the deep South, somewhere between Frog Level and Smyrna, Georgia, along Highway 57.

In that first year, Stacy Alley choreographed and co-starred as Rhetta. For year 15, she’s directing, and choreographing again, while letting Therkelsen take over as big sis Rhetta. UA students and recent grads fill the cast: Jim (Dylan Davis), Prudie (Allie Stewart), Jackson (Daniel Fobes), L.M. (Nicholas Coker) and Eddie (Matt Kelley). While the kids still sing, play pots-and-pans percussion and dance, there weren’t enough instrument-proficient students to play the show as usually done — the Pump Boys usually handle all instrumentation — so they’re backed by musical director Terry Moore on piano, Josh Green on guitar, Ben Holcomb on bass, and Tristan Dierman on drums. They hired a bit of a ringer in Green, who’s just finished a run of the show for Birmingham’s Terrific New Theatre. While everyone was encouraged to come in to first rehearsals ready to roll, off book and knowing the music, Green had a heads-up, and got there first.

“I couldn’t pretend like I was that talented,” he said, laughing.

After a few years teaching at Arkansas State, Alley returned to UA as faculty. This will be her ninth year at the beach, and Moore’s sixth. Stage and company manager Mary Fran Crook, another UA grad, returns for her fourth SummerTide. So it’s in many ways a reunion.

“There are (visitors) who remember specific things, ask about specific people from earlier shows,” Alley said. “It’s like a little happy family.”

And it’s one of the hotter attractions in the laid-back beach town.

“There’s not a lot to do in Gulf Shores after you eat,” she said, “you’ve been in the sun all day... so these short shows, they’re not rocket science. They’re fun.”

The premise of “Pump Boys and Dinettes” is simply that the audience is sitting in, or very near, as the friends — and occasional sweethearts — get together and jam at the end of a long working day. There’s not a plot, really, but some jokes and short tales bridged by a set of old-school rock ‘n’ roll and country, twangy rockabilly and ballads, with whimsical pop such as “Farmer Tan,” “Drinkin’ Shoes” and “The Night Dolly Parton Was Almost Mine,” a driving “Highway 57,” the slinky mildly suggestive “Tips,” and tear-jerkers like “Mamaw” and “Sister.” It’s not far from something Buffett might have written, though they’re all original songs by the first cast, written back in the early ’80s.

Because there’s not much happening, beyond picking and grinning, the toughest work for the kids has been developing relationships: Who do these folks mean to each other? How do the boys relate? What are their hearts yearning toward?

“It’s about your friends that are your family,” Alley said.

Even though the boys aren’t handling guitars, “The whole show is just like a big rock concert,” Kelley said. “It’s different than most; I think it’s a fun twist on what’s normally done.”

The theater itself has been cosmetically and otherwise enhanced over the years: For 2018, the Meyer will have new seats. The cast and crew work other duties, including leading arts/performance workshops for area kids, and playing or talking for the occasional promotional gig at a radio station or elsewhere. Then six nights a week, Tuesdays-Sundays, they’ll play this little show.

“It’s a great gig,” Therkelsen said. “You get to work at the beach. Your audience pretty much always loves you, which isn’t something that usually happens in theater.

“Then, at night, you get to do theater.”

“Pump Boys and Dinettes” runs Tuesdays-Sundays, beginning this coming Friday, June 1, and continuing through June 29, at the George C. Meyer Performing Arts Center, 2022 West Second S., Gulf Shores. Tickets are \$20 general, \$15 for children 12 and up. Group rates of \$15 each are available for parties of 10 or more. Some early June shows are sold out; call 251-968-6721 or see www.summertide.org for more.

Reach Mark Hughes Cobb at mark.cobb@tuscaloosaneews.com or 205-722-0201.