



Secret Affairs of Mildred Wild

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By Philip Pearce

MOUNTAIN COMMUNITY THEATER in Ben Lomond advertises itself as Santa Cruz County's longest running community theater. My first visit ever was to Sunday's matinee halfway through the current run of a loud and fast-paced farce called *The Secret Affairs of Mildred Wild*.

Park Hall, the company's home base on Mill Street, has a nice community center atmosphere. About seventy of us nearly filled unraked rows of folding chairs facing a raised stage peopled by a cast who knew what they were doing and a succession of technical challenges that would have stumped a bigger company, but which Mountain met without a hitch. There were no reserved seats, but us one-time patrons sat behind three front rows deservedly marked off for season ticket subscribers.

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There's no lobby, but in the space behind the chairs friendly staff sold popcorn and soft drinks, and the walls were lined with posters that show this hard-working theater team can tackle *Our Town*, *The Rainmaker*, *Black Comedy* and other impressive and important scripts.

The Secret Affairs of Mildred Wild isn't one of them.

The actors, one and all, were quick, competent and experienced. The direction aimed for loud, fast and unsubtle, but in material like *The Secret Affairs of Mildred Wild* subtle would be a puzzling mistake.

The title and grubby setting seemed to suggest that Mildred Wild is a kind of urban female Walter Mitty. Like him she certainly daydreams herself into fantasy worlds brighter than the real one, in Mildred's case a dingy flat above her husband's doomed Greenwich Village candy store. Playwright Paul Zindel, like Thurber, has written about reality versus dreams. But there the comparison with Thurber's classic short story really ends. Walter Mitty's daydreams are wistful, funny and ultimately believable. Mildred's are loud, over-the-top spin-offs confusedly based vaguely on surface details of the old movies and the new television prize contests which obsess her twenty-four hours a day.

Director Erik Gandolfi's program notes suggest that becoming Fay Wray in *King Kong* or Vivien Leigh in *Gone with the Wind* in some way empowers Mildred to solve her real life conflicts with people like her sexually unresponsive husband Roy (a harried and argumentative Jackson Wolfe) or her busybody sister-in-law Helen (the sharp-tongued and versatile Kathie Kratochvil). Mildred herself insists that people like Rita Hayworth and Bette Davis tell her what to do. Maybe. But in the relentless rush and activity of the show, I couldn't see that these movie sequences resulted in much more than some angry rants against her antagonists, after which everyone seemed to revert to being the same person they were before Mildred hopped on her bed and dreamed. It's possible that a dirty talking and bibulous nun, acted with brisk assurance by Donna Young-Fasolas, put a stop to her convent's diocesan tax scam, but all we got was an embarrassed shrug from Sister Celia, so who knows?

The plot, such as it was, involved the threatened bull-doing of the Wilds' candy store and apartment and their proposed move into joint management of the non-liturgical aspects of a local convent.

Hannah Eckstein was an energetic and appealing Mildred, leaving the stage only long enough to do quick costume changes into figures like Scarlett O'Hara or Shirley Temple. It's a role so taxing Eckstein deserved praise for its overall charm and can be forgiven for small passing lapses in detail. It's just a quibble, but for one who spends so much time singing it, Mildred probably would give more than just a weak approximation of Bing Crosby's 1942 hit "Moonlight Becomes You."

The fact is the characters are all stereotypes in a script that doesn't even supply them with the steady consistency of a good stereotype. When anyone needs to defy logic, motivation and believability in order to move into the next farce-based situation that's exactly what happens. And the situations have a nagging familiarity. When Shireen Doyle as Roy's sexy, new-age inamorata takes cover behind a screen while Mildred is being interviewed by Sister Celia for the convent job, it doesn't take a lot of imagination to know Doyle is going to knock over the screen and beat a quick retreat in her underwear.

Hackneyed as so much of it is, everything happens with unflagging skill and precision. The entire cast briskly navigates even the more tiresome "everyday life" sections, and shines in many of the daydream movie and television sequences which are backed by impressive and slick projections on the upstage wall of the set.

I loved Andrew Crocker and Jen Egeland as two relentlessly smarmy television presenters, and, in a musical high point of the afternoon that had little connection to anything else in the story, the entire company joined in a hilarious singin', dancin' send-up of "On the Good Ship Lar-lee-parp." This featured Eckstein done up like a tap dancing Sophie Tucker in sausage curls and little-girl pinafore, with one of the

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choruses brilliantly sung by a spot-on Andrews Sisters trio of Kratochvil, Shireen Doyle and Julia Cunningham.

It was like a full-dress game of charades, with people you didn't know had it in them suddenly blossoming out in goofy costumes and slick vocals you never guessed they could manage. Wonderful performances. Spot-on electronic special effects. Pity about the script.

Photo by Peter Gelblum

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