



## Play review High Street Arts Center puts on a happy show with 'Birdie'

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Elvis Presley has been on the minds of many Americans this month, since August 16 marked the 30th anniversary of his death in 1977. This makes Moorpark's High Street Arts Center's current staging of "Bye Bye Birdie" more than timely.

Broadway's musical homage to Presley was the last hit of the 1959-60 Broadway season and made a star out of a lanky, charismatic song-and-dance man named Dick Van Dyke.

The sprightly tunes and unpretentious plot brought the innocent 1950s to a close and mirrored the youthful exuberance of the pre-Beatles pop music scene. The musical was a smash hit, as theatergoers happily hummed catchy songs from the show such as "Put on a Happy Face" and "A Lot of Livin' To Do."

The plot for the show was inspired by the real-life drafting of Elvis Presley into the Army in 1958 and its effect on the teenage population that made up his fan base.

The Presley-like character, a self-involved, hip-swinging, anti-establishment singer, was named Conrad Birdie after future country star Conway Twitty, who was, in the late '50s, one of the first Elvis impersonators.

The story centers around a publicity stunt hatched by struggling songwriter Albert Peterson to have Birdie sing one of Peterson's songs on "The Ed Sullivan Show" as a farewell to his fans, with Birdie planting a kiss on a randomly selected teenager.

As Albert Peterson, Paul Bartlett is likable enough and has a pleasant voice, but lacks conviction in his performance. You never really get the impression that Albert is battling pressure from three sides: his neglected fiancée/secretary, Rose; his smothering mother, Mae; and his faltering professional career. Masaya Palmer, on the other hand, makes a splendid Rose—forthright, sassy and vulnerable. Her sinewy dance in the "Shriners Ballet" sequence was a highlight of the show.

Sharon Brandenberger's Mae Peterson is more underbearing than overbearing. Although she has the perfect look for Mae, she's too lovable in her portrayal of a character that suppresses Albert as he struggles to cut the apron strings and propose to Rose. Her

tentative singing on "A Mother Doesn't Matter Anymore" was nearly drowned out by the orchestra; the best part of her performance is her withering glares at Rose.

Seventeen-year-old Annie Block-Weiss is excellent as Kim McAfee, the teen from Sweet Apple, Ohio, who is the chosen target of Birdie's televised farewell smooch. Block-Weiss has a lovely voice and is totally believable as the girl who wants to be a woman a little too quickly.

Chad Burns, who plays the pivotal role of Conrad Birdie, has the moves and voice Birdie should have, but seems more like one of the other teenagers rather than a pampered superstar. Granted, the costume department could have helped with some of this: In the scene where he makes his first appearance, Birdie is dressed in the same pastel colors as his fans when he should have been wearing the famous Presley gold lamé jumpsuit or the black leather jacket he wore in a later scene.

Matt Howell is a walking ulcer as the hilariously explosive Harry McAfee, who fights for control of his family yet is starstruck when offered a part on the "Sullivan" show. Howell proves that you can't overplay that role, and his performance of "Kids" is a showstopper.

Similarly, Hayley Cariker is delightful as Ursula, Kim's friend and the leader of the Conrad Birdie Fan Club. Her shrieking, over-the-top performance as Birdie's most exuberant fan makes her a standout in every scene she's in.

Paul Taylor's musical direction of the small six-piece combo in the balcony is well done, aside from the trumpet player's failure to hit many of his notes.

Although, after nearly 50 years, some elements of "Bye Bye Birdie" are dated, the show does point out that certain things remain constant, like teenage gossip, the generation gap, celebrity worship and the pangs of first love. That, plus Charles Strouse and Lee Adams' dynamite score, makes "Bye Bye Birdie" a winner all around.

"Bye Bye Birdie" continues through Sept. 16 at the High Street Arts Center, 45 E. High St. For ticket and performance information, call (805) 495-8700 or visit [www.highstreetartscenter.com](http://www.highstreetartscenter.com).