

Grits: The Musical: Southern fried gingham

By [Perry Tannenbaum](#)

Walk into Actor's Theatre of Charlotte these nights and you might experience the fleeting sensation that you have mistakenly wandered into an Uptown florist -- or a new branch of Julie's Clothing. Scenery onstage for the McGee Communications & Entertainment production of ***Grits: The Musical*** is as colorful as a beachball, as neat and adorable as a ribbon bow, and as clean as newly-laid table linens at a church social.

So are the boutique concessions in the lobby, including the one for the book that inspired singer/composer Erica McGee's stage adaptation, Deborah Ford's *Friends Are Forevah*. Expectations aren't confounded once McGee and her trio of singin', chattin', harmonizin' *co-conspirators* take the stage -- unless you haven't noticed how deftly McGee's set design (with Chip Decker) skirts the rim of tackiness, peering over the edge without ever quite falling in.

The open French doors upstage aren't for anything so mundane as entrances and exits. Instead they frame projected domestic photos, followed with pithy quotations -- rendered in script for maximum Hallmark Card preciousness -- by true-blue *Grits*. If you don't already know that these are Girls Raised In The South, honey, you are simply attached to the wrong grapevine.

Costume designs, by McGee and Anna Marie Gatto, tend to be the same pattern for all four women, splayed out into four primary colors. The most garish rainbow outbreak occurs at the start of Act 2, when the quartet appears in four different shades of the same gingham apron, singing Irving Berlin's "Oh, How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning." To show us why, each of them brandishes a different implement of the Southern woman's endless toils: Nicole Danielle Watts as Florence has the knitting needles, Kim Lamphear as Virginia wields a Mason jar, Julia Vanderveen as Charlotte slaves at a washboard, and McGee as Georgia cradles a mixing bowl. All play percussion on those props.

Choreography by Tammy Fox is cute as a button, never threatening to overstretch the singers' abilities, and the pre-recorded musical arrangements by Michael Van Patter yield the spotlight to the live *Grits* with a nicely gauged, bouncy grace. McGee herself isn't quite yielding enough to other composers, so Act 1, when she refuses altogether to give in, isn't as tuneful and varied as Act 2. That's where she fashions new lyrics for Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker* in "High C," closes with a gospel medley that includes "Will the Circle Be Unbroken" and "Amazing Grace," and rocks with her own "Myrtle the Girdle," a recognizable offshoot of "Anyway You Want Me," the Elvis hit.

McGee's best original -- and her best vocal onstage -- is "Sweet Tea," but she's also personable heading her "I Hope Dolly Parton Lives Forever" tribute. Vanderveen has the best comedy bit in "High C," which turns out to be song about a piano recital. Drawing the sappiest ballads, Lamphear is wonderful in "It Ain't All Thorns," while Watts is at her righteous best on lead vocal for the Act 1 finale, "Crossing the Line," after a fine doo-wop sojourn with "Lipstick Sisters," her backups helpfully reminding us, "Don't forget to blot!"

Everybody isn't going to love *Grits: The Musical*, but old folk, shut-ins, and clean-living Christians are a good bet. The rest of us can take delight -- and solace -- in the quirky elasticity of Ford's definition of GritsÆ. It's wide enough to include Dolly and Lillian Hellman, narrow enough to toss out country clubbers, and elastic enough to grant honorary admission to Bette Davis, Dorothy Parker, Maya Angelou, and Coco Chanel.

Treating Ford's graciously meandering text like Holy Writ, McGee has certainly targeted her audiences well. The good-sized house on Saturday night mostly seemed to be lapping it all up with complete satisfaction. One of these sensitive souls ventured forth into the night after the show, peered across Stonewall Street, and noticed the huge NASCAR logo in the sky.

"Is *that* the new NASCAR Museum?" she wondered.

Now there's the Ford/McGee/*Grits* audience: literate, with a humble grasp of the obvious.