

## **'GRITS': Warm, mild, often tasty**

But you have to like the old-fashioned, sweet South to be able to swallow it.

By Lawrence Toppman

The song “Sweet Tea” comes halfway through act I of “GRITS: The Musical,” and how you feel about that beverage will probably tell you how you'll feel about the show.

The acronym stands for “Girls Raised in the South,” with the emphasis on “girls.” I've never seen a musical where men were less relevant; I'm not sure my gender figures at all in the songs, except for a tribute to a beloved Shih Tzu dog and implicit references to the chap who died at Calvary.

Charlotte's Erica McGee has adapted the book.

“Friends are Forevah” by Deborah Ford, linking 16 vignettes to 16 original songs and directing the whole shebang. She has been generous in handing out material; she has four solos, while the other three actresses get three solos apiece. (Everyone pitches in on the ensembles.)

“GRITS” deals with a very specific South, espousing simple values about which most of us might agree; it celebrates food, unified families, a simple trust in God. It's a preservation in crinoline and gingham of a time when nobody locked their doors because they trusted their neighbors. (Or, perhaps, because they had so little worth stealing. That would be a Northerner's cynical view).

“GRITS” doesn't address issues of class, gender inequality or race, except for one anecdote about not judging by appearances. It doesn't analyze or inform; it embraces a world that was part reality, part myth.

McGee isn't afraid to tease Southerners; the friendly number “Lipstick Sisters” gently laughs at women who aren't fully dressed without fire-engine lips. But she can pay tribute to the hard work of motherhood while acknowledging that the women doing it would rather sleep in once in a while.

She closes the show with a gospel medley and uses two other musical sources for tunes, the march from Tchaikovsky's “Nutcracker” and Irving Berlin's “Oh, How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning.”

The other lyrics and melodies all come from her brain. They're flavored mainly with country music, a bit of '80s pop, a hint of blues, even some mild boogie-woogie. Her tunes are stronger than her lyrics, and some musical hooks work quickly. (This show uses a pre-recorded band, and the singers have to be careful not to overpower it. Mostly, they are.)

Because “GRITS” has no ongoing characters – each of the 16 vignettes leading to songs is told by a different woman – the show relies on the personalities of the actresses. The best asset they can bring is naturalness: We have to believe these women have just put down washing or spatulas or prayer books to let us into their lives.

McGee is utterly natural, especially when discussing her own real-life meeting with Dolly Parton. Nicole Danielle Watts is equally at home in quiet dignity and in exhilaration. Kim Lamphear has a good time as an aged “mountain mama,” and Julia VanderVeen earns many a laugh as a flustered girl at a piano recital.