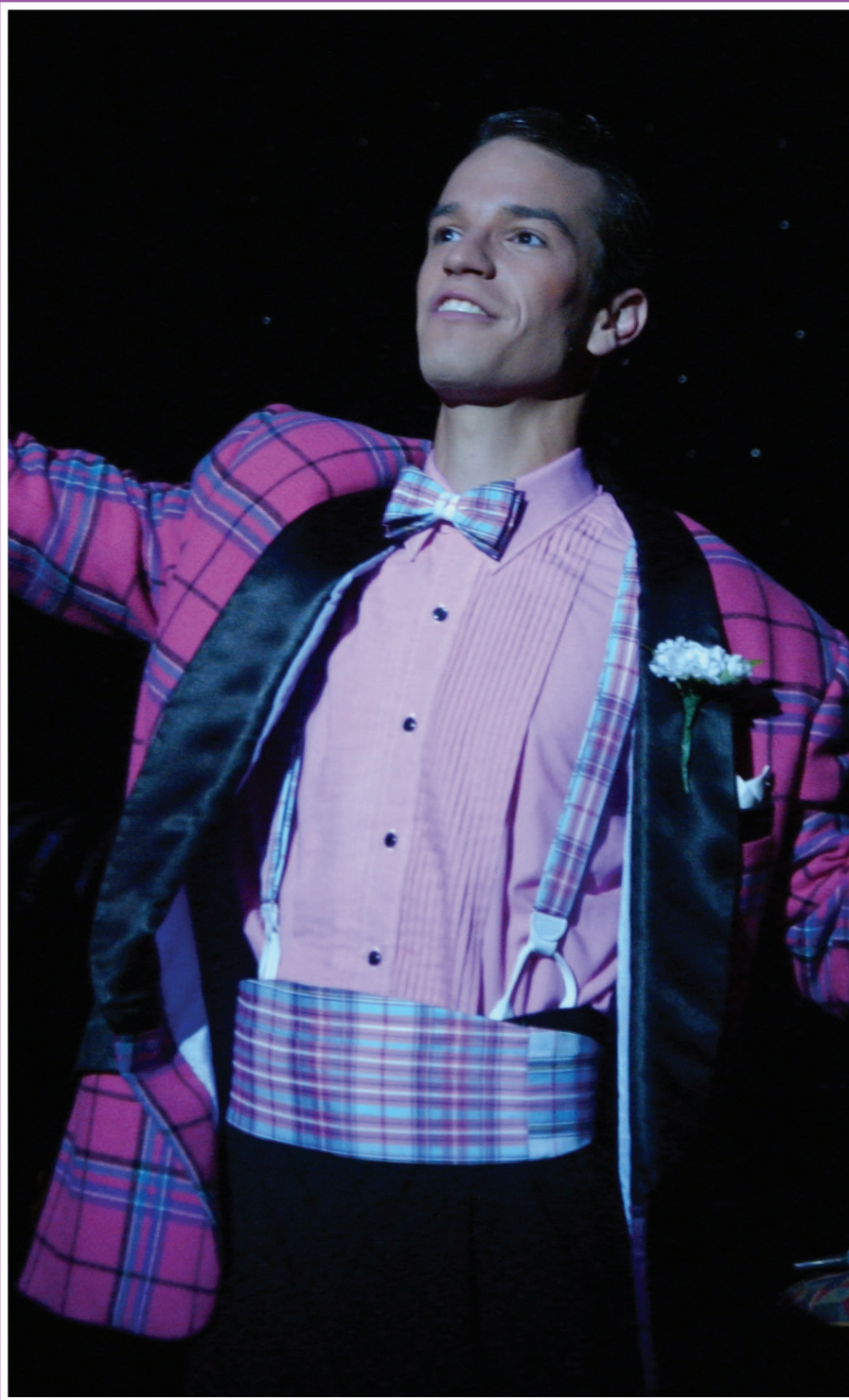




Insights

A Study Guide to the Utah Shakespeare Festival



*Forever
Plaid*

The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespeare Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival's stages.

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Forever Plaid

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Synopsis: *Forever Plaid*

In the 1950s, guys across the country banded together to sing in the basement for fun. If things worked out, they might be hired to sing at weddings, conventions, proms and country club socials. Inspired by the success of recording stars, they made plans to zoom into careers of fame and fortune. But the musical taste of America was changing, and the country would not stop to listen to their dreams. *Forever Plaid* is the story of such a group.

Once upon a time, there were four guys (Sparky, Smudge, Jinx and Frankie) who loved to sing. They all met in high school when they joined the audiovisual club (1956). Discovering they shared an affection for music and entertaining, they got together and dreamed of becoming like their idols—the Four Aces, the Four Lads, the Four Freshmen, the Hi-los and the Crew Cuts. They rehearsed in the basement of Smudge’s family’s plumbing supply company. It was here they became *Forever Plaid*—a name that connects traditional values of family, home and harmony.

Although the new sound, rock ’n’ roll, was quickly overtaking the sounds of the forties and fifties, the Plaids believed in their music. As their sound developed, they sang at family gatherings and fund-raisers and eventually graduated to supermarket openings and proms. They had little time for romance or leisure, for they supported their fantasy by holding down day jobs—Frankie was in dental supplies, Smudge was in bathroom fixtures, Sparky was in better dresses. They devoted themselves to singing at nights and on weekends. Then, finally, they landed their first big gig at the Airport Hilton cocktail bar—the Fusel Lounge.

Then it happened. On February 9, 1964, en route to pick up their custom-made plaid tuxedos, they were driving in their cherry-red 1954 Mercury convertible and rehearsing their big finale when they were slammed broadside by a school bus filled with eager Catholic teens. The teens were on their way to witness the Beatles make their U.S. television debut on the Ed Sullivan Show and miraculously escaped injury. The members of *Forever Plaid* were killed instantly. It is at that moment, when their careers and lives ended, that the story of *Forever Plaid* begins.

Through the power of Harmony and the Expanding Holes in the Ozone Layer, in conjunction with the positions of the planets and all the other astro-technical stuff, they are allowed to come back to perform the show they never got to do in life.

And, after having completed their Mission of Harmony, our men in plaid must return to the cosmos. Hopefully, through this production, their dreams will live on forever.

Characters: *Foxtire*

Francis: The leader and caretaker of the group, Francis has the most confidence. He takes care of

his fellow Plaids and makes sure everyone knows where they're supposed to be and what is supposed to happen next. He is also the connection between the audience and the guys. He has asthma, which acts up whenever numbers are too fast or the choreography gets too energetic. He has a great deal of compassion for the music and the group.

Sparky: The “cut-up” of the group, Sparky is always looking for ways to crack jokes. He is very sharp and loves singing his tailor-made solos. He wears a retainer and has a slight speech impediment or lisp. Even though he is energetic and clever, he cares for his stepbrother, Jinx. He sings with a joyous bravura and loves to perform. He loves to tell stories and relishes every word. He is the comic engine of the show.

Jinx: The shy one, Jinx is usually terrified. He doesn't always remember what songs come next or what the next move is. He is Sparky's stepbrother and there is a little sibling rivalry going on between them. He occasionally gets a nose bleed when he sings above an A. He lives his life terrified. He was abused and beaten. He is only in the group because he sings the high notes beautifully. The others are very protective of him.

Smudge: The worrier, Smudge worries about the props and the running order and always assumes that the audience won't like him. He has a chronic nervous stomach and is very reluctant to perform. He is also very clumsy. Smudge never enjoys or appreciates what he has. He always worries about what is coming up and regrets what is past.

About the Playwright: Stuart Ross

Stuart Ross was born September 10, 1950, the son of George (an attorney) and Mae (a secretary)

Ross. He received a bachelor of arts degree in 1972 from Clark University and received additional training and education at the University of Manchester, England and the Circle in the Square Theatre School with Nikos Psacharopoulos.

A prolific writer, director, and choreographer, his most memorable and successful play is certainly *Forever Plaid* which has played, and continues to play, across the country and around the world. He created and directed the original production in 1980 at the old Downstairs Cabaret in Rochester. He has since directed subsequent productions across the United States and in Japan, Canada, and England.

His first off-Broadway directing work was at the helm of *The Knight of the Twelve Saucers* in 1976 which ran for six performances. Since then he has been the writer and/or director for many successful plays in New York City, including *The Heebie Jeebes* at the Westside Arts Theatre in 1981, *Not-So-New Faces* at the O'Neals Upstairs Theatre in 1982, *Sharing* at the Equity Library Theatre in 1983, *Lunch Girls* at the Courtyard Playhouse in 1984, *Hollywood Opera* at The Ballroom in 1985, *Secrets of the Lava Lamp* at the Manhattan Theatre Club in 1985, and *Creeps* in 1985.

Other directing work includes *Breaking Up*; *Nasty Little Secrets*; *Conrack*; *It's a Bird, It's a Plane, It's Superman*; and many others. He also served for six seasons as a director and dramaturg for the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Conference.

Other plays he has written include *Fun with Dick and Jane* and the Tony Award-nominated musical *Starmites*, both in 1987. More recently he has written *Tea with Bea*, directed three productions for HBO's New Writers Project, and, in 1998, he and Mark Hampton wrote and staged *The Boswell Sisters*, a new musical at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Conference for the National Musical Theatre.

Forever Nostalgia

By Don Leavitt

From Insights, 2004

Ah, boy bands. Take a group of earnest teens with dreams of celebrity, mix equal portions of unrequited romance and adolescent angst and set it to music. Teach the boys to dance and girls everywhere will be screaming.

Today's boy band is all about hip-hop choreography, movie star looks and lyrics full of anxious love and raging hormones. Well, the sound has changed but the message is still the same. Ask anyone over the age of fifty about boy bands, and they'll likely tell you about a bygone era when the bands wore identical outfits, performed simple dance moves and sang tight, heartbreaking harmonies about anxious love and raging hormones.

The guys in *Forever Plaid* are just this sort of group—four young men in matching outfits singing harmony in a time when boy bands like the Four Aces and the Hi-Los were the main attraction at the high school prom. As a group, the Plaids embody the sound of four-part male harmony that was a staple of the late fifties; as a play, *Forever Plaid* memorializes the death of a sound at the hands of rock and roll, and celebrates the pursuit of dreams despite insurmountable odds.

Forever Plaid made its off-Broadway debut in 1990 and surprised everyone by playing for more than four years on New York's Upper West Side. Within two years of its debut, *Forever Plaid* was a favorite of amateur and professional theatre companies from Los Angeles to Boston. Written by Stuart Ross, *Forever Plaid* is both a tribute and a send-up, honoring all-American wholesomeness while poking fun at a musical style that owes its demise to the invasion of a new kind of boy band—the Beatles.

There's no shortage of symbolism here. The story behind *Forever Plaid* hinges on the fact that the Beatles have killed the Plaids, literally, and the real story takes place before the play even begins: the Plaids are Sparky, Smudge, Jinx and Frankie, four friends who met in their high school's audiovisual club and who share a love of singing. They form their own group and rehearse in a basement while dreaming of the fame and fortune enjoyed by the boy bands they idolize.

The Plaids slowly make a name for themselves as most start-up bands do—by performing at family parties, store openings and proms. They finally get their big break, an invitation to hold their first public concert at the Fusil-Lounge, a cocktail bar at the airport Hilton. On February 9, 1964, the boys are on the way to pick up their custom-made plaid tuxedos. Their '54 Mercury convertible is broadsided by a bus filled with Catholic schoolgirls on their way to the Ed Sullivan show, where the Beatles are about to make their U.S. television debut. The *Forever Plaids* are killed instantly, without getting their plaid tuxedos or ever realizing their dream.

This is where *Forever Plaid* begins. Ross writes, "Through the powers of harmony and the expanding holes in the Ozone Layer . . . [the Plaids] have been allowed to come back to perform the show they never got to do in life." For one night only, the boys get the chance to prove for all time that they really were as good as they imagined. As the four dead Plaids slowly take the stage, one says, "Holy Canoli! We're finally back on earth!" Another says, "We could make the biggest comeback since Lazarus!"

In a way, this is exactly what the Plaids are doing—making the ultimate comeback. That's because *Forever Plaid's* back story is a fairly accurate description of what happened to popular music during the early sixties. By the end of the fifties, America's taste in music was changing. Four-part harmony groups had to compete with rock and roll, which was slowly taking over the radio waves, thanks in no small part to the popularity of Elvis Presley. By the start of the sixties, rock and roll was firmly in place as the favorite music of America's youth, and four-part harmony boy bands were becoming increasingly less popular. Of course, some of the best known harmony groups survived, but by 1964 it was almost impossible for a start-up group like the Plaids to make it big. Recording companies and radio stations just weren't interested in their sound anymore.

The British invasion nailed the lid on the four-part boy bands' coffin. When the Beatles made that historic debut on Ed Sullivan, they initiated a whole new kind of boy band, one based on rock and roll with quick tempos and amplified instruments. The Beatles and other boy bands from the sixties used four-part harmony in their music, but the sound was completely different from the mellow, tight harmonies of fifties groups like the Four Freshmen or the Crew Cuts. Before the end of the decade, rock and roll would rule and songs like "Three Coins in a Fountain" and "Heart and Soul" would be labeled musical nostalgia.

As a result, this performance really is a once in an after-lifetime opportunity for the Plaids. Forever Plaid is not only a chance to perform the music they love; it is also a chance to hit a high that most likely would have eluded them in life. As they make their way through the hits of their generation, the Plaids get to pretend the Beatles never happened, and the audience gets to reminisce about a time when parents didn't need to worry about the music their kids were listening to.

Forever Plaid is about dreams coming true, about reaching one's potential and fulfilling one's destiny. As the play progresses, we watch the Plaids transform from bumbling spirit-geeks to confident superstars. Of course, it is not an easy journey. First, each Plaid suffers from an almost debilitating flaw that must be overcome before true stardom may be achieved. Frankie, the group's heartthrob, hyperventilates on stage; Sparky, the mischievous party boy, develops a speech impediment when he's nervous; Jinx is prone to nosebleeds; while Smudge suffers from anxiety-induced indigestion.

Second, the boys admit they know very little about love or romance, because they were too busy in life chasing their dream to experience the very things they've been singing about. But they know what plaid stands for, telling the audience that the Scottish material represents home and family. What they lack in experience, they more than make up for in earnestness. At the end of the play, when an usher brings a big box on stage and the boys open it to find their plaid tuxedos, we understand that the Plaids have earned their wings, so to speak. Smudge announces he doesn't want to go back, saying, "Maybe if we don't finish the show, we can pick up where we left off." But a band mate wisely responds, "It's time to go. We touched our dream . . . let's sing the last song and go like Plaids."

The finale ends, the curtain falls, and the audience cheers, because nostalgia, like plaid, is forever.

