

## FAYETTEVILLE Making Music In The Moment

### 3 Penny Acre lights the fire in 'Sundown Town'

By Becca Bacon Martin

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FAYETTEVILLE — An orchestra pit just wouldn't be appropriate for TheatreSquared's "Sundown Town," a drama set in a small Arkansas community in 1918.

So 3 Penny Acre is playing in a barn loft.

It's a new experience for the Fayetteville folk trio and a first for the 5-year-old regional theater.

"Sundown Town," the TheatreSquared production on stage through Feb. 20, was intended to be a bluegrass musical, says playwright Kevin Cohea. But then Cohea came across a turn-of-the-century promotional flyer for Siloam Springs - "a city of natural beauty" with "no malaria, no mosquitoes and no Negroes." And it became a very different play.

But the story Cohea ended up with, combined with the bluegrass and gospel music that was the original inspiration, was "dynamite from a theatrical perspective," says Bob Ford, one of the founders of TheatreSquared.

"Putting the live music of a highly accomplished ensemble into the mix is enormous."

For 3 Penny Acre, founded in 2006, playing the "soundtrack" for "Sundown Town" requires reining in its usually free-spirited style.

"When we perform, it's a little more loose," says Bryan Hembree, guitar player, vocalist and one of the band's founding members. "During a show, we may decide to tell a story about a song or take an extended solo on a song. But everything in the play is very formatted."

That's not to say that 3 Penny Acre is approaching its new role in a traditional orchestral way.

"If there was a musical score, we've gotten off book and are performing it live," Hembree describes. "We're not an orchestra reading the music. We wanted to get off book, be in that moment just as the actors are, playing from our heads and from a deep knowledge of the songs, instead of what's written on the page."

The "score" includes more than a dozen songs and "walking music," as Hembree calls it - transitional music between scenes, as films often have. "I love the way it's been described as a soundtrack," he says.

The music is traditional, folk-gospel in style, he describes, with some more modern tunes that fit in that genre. It all started with a source CD that inspired playwright Cohea as he wrote.

"You know the music came first," Cohea reminds.

“My sister has an extensive bluegrass collection, so I borrowed music from her and from David Pickens (of TheatreSquared), who has sort of served as my musicologist.

“Then we had this idea that we wanted to find an already established bluegrass or folk band,” Cohea goes on. “Recorded music never entered my mind. I always wanted a live band onstage, seen by the audience. There’s something special about that.”

The final musical arrangement is a collaboration among Cohea, director Kevin Fox, musical director Jeannie Lee and 3 Penny Acre, Hembree says.

“It’s not as if we took that CD and said we’re going to play it like this,” he explains.

“Some verses were dropped, some arrangements were smoothed out, and then we put our spin on it.

“The songs are definitely character songs,” he adds.

“What the character is singing is of massive importance to the storyline.”

Of course, devoting nearly three months to rehearsing and performing “SundownTown” has cut into 3 Penny Acre’s full-time job.

“We’ve stopped playing our songs and worked up a whole new show,” Hembree says.

“But it’s only going to run for three weeks.”

Still, 3 Penny Acre is making the most of the investment. A limited-edition vinyl recording of “God’s Gonna Cut You Down” will be available at performances, and a concert that will include three or four songs from the show - along with music from the group’s most recent CD, “Highway 71” - will wrap up the “Sundown Town” run on Feb. 20 at Nadine Baum Studios.

“It’s definitely been an emotional roller coaster,” Hembree says of the experience.

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