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theater review

"My Partner" stakes its claim in Cripple Creek

*** RATING

By John Moore

Denver Post Theater Critic, reviewing from Cripple Creek



Mary Brandon (Samantha Berman) is taken by Joe Saunders (Kyle Harris) in "My Partner."
(Cripple Creek Players)

This is not your grandmother's melodrama. More like your great-great-great-grandmother's melodrama.

The Cripple Creek Players present a classic melodrama each summer, largely as written and performed in the late 19th century - only (thankfully) lopped in half to come in at a more modernly palatable two hours' time.

The word "surprising" popped up throughout my first visit to the Cripple Creek Players. It applies in the best sense to their theater, sets, costumes and acting abilities.

Best of all, their 2006 offering is surprisingly substantive. "My Partner" is steeped in local and theatrical history. Its story, originally set in California but since moved to the historic mining town of Cripple Creek, was performed on the New York stage in 1879 before a national tour and a silent film adaptation in 1909. That it is being staged today in Cripple Creek's gorgeously refurbished Butte Opera House makes this the perfect fusion of town, venue and subject matter.

To many, melodrama means twirling mustaches and over-the-top camp. But while there's plenty of booing bad guys and huzzah-ing heroes to go around here, the villain is refreshingly complex. And our hero undergoes a genuine, nearly existential, catharsis. Sure, there are moments of pure corn syrup, but the writing in spots is also genuinely thoughtful.

Yet the staging doesn't feel dusty or antiquated - or by any means subtle.

It's loads of fun.

We begin with a high-energy vaudevillian singalong led by piano man Josh Lamoreaux, who's soon joined by a mingling, hand-clapping cast of 11 - most of them talented imports from the University of Arizona.

The basic plot revolves around two prospecting partners attracted to the same woman. When Ned Singleton (Scott Reynolds) is discovered murdered, his innocent partner Joe Saunders (Kyle Harris) is condemned to death. It's not giving anything away to say our hero is exonerated, but his path to freedom is not simple.

As Joe, Harris settles that oft-asked question, "Whatever became of Kirk Cameron?" He's a (very likable) dead ringer. As the villain, Mickey Burdick is kind of Shakespearean in spots, and kind of mopey Val Kilmer in others. And talented local veteran Mel Moser brings needed seasoning to this fresh-scrubbed cast as a smarmy major.

Once in a great while in this job, you come across an actor whose eventual stardom is all but inevitable. Here it's the winning Cara Manuele, an adorable young comic charmer who has natural instincts and timing - not to mention a killer voice. Here she plays Delores Conchita Rivero Del Fuego, a hard-drinking temptress. Remember that name. You'll see it again.

As is often the case, the melodrama eventually gives way to an olio - a post-show song-and-dance routine that showcases the talents of the cast. Highlights include a clever expectoration demonstration (really!) and a "Jersey Boys" homage. But it's also seriously random and even garish in spots.

Still, all in all, a very competent and enjoyable afternoon - surprise, surprise.

Theater critic John Moore can be reached at 303-820-1056 or jmoore@denverpost.com.