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THEATER REVIEW

## 'Greasepaint's' wit is all in good company

\*Lively shtick and stellar performances by a talented cast give this version of the 1965 musical an endearing, energetic quality.

*By David C. Nichols, Special to The Times*

Consummate talent takes the prize in Anthony Newley and Leslie Bricusse's "The Roar of the Greasepaint, the Smell of the Crowd," which Musical Theatre Guild presented on Monday at the Alex Theatre. Adroitly directed by Todd Nielsen, with stellar lead performances by Kevin McMahon and Roy Leake Jr., this concert staging of the 1965 musical allegory has a vivacity that counters its quainter qualities.

A flop in its 1964 Nottingham premiere, "Greasepaint" moved to Broadway in 1965, courtesy of David Merrick, who saw a successor to the authors' smash "Stop the World - I Want to Get Off" in this tale of upper-crust Sir, underdog Cocky and their Game (of life). "Greasepaint" ran for 231 performances on Broadway, producing standards in "A Wonderful Day Like Today," "The Joker," "Look at That Face" and "Who Can I Turn To?"

After musical director James May's first-rate combo dispatches the overture, "Greasepaint's" chorus of urchins, led by the Kid (Shauna Markey), appears amid garbage cans and wardrobe racks in "The Beautiful Land." Markey and colleagues Jennie Fahn, Melissa Fahn, Laurel Hatfield, Kristi Holden, Marisol Mireles and Carly Turner deftly scrub away the singsong treacle. The principals - treacherous Sir (Leake) and ambivalent Cocky (McMahon - enter down the aisle, launch "A Wonderful Day" with effortless brio and the Game begins.

An Establishment elitist down to his spats, Sir sets the rules and changes them whenever proletarian Cocky threatens to advance around the hopscotch board. As Sir tells the Kid: "Never take advantage of an opponent ... unless the opportunity presents itself." Sir's manipulations and Cocky's resistance unfold in self-contained songs, including music hall struts ("Where Would You Be Without Me") and pop power ballads ("This Dream"). While Sir browbeats and Cocky bemoans, the urchins provide percussive commentary and stage tableaux.

Act 1 peaks with Cocky's dream Girl (Jill Townsend), her liberating potential thwarted when Sir casually deflowers her and Cocky attempts to murder Sir. Act 2 brings a Stranger (the rousing Michael A. Sheppard), who ignores Sir's rules and reaches the center ("Feeling Good"), inspiring Cocky to follow suit. Despite Sir's increasingly frantic machinations, which include a Bully (Sam Zeller) dressed in Girl drag, Cocky and the urchins abandon the fixed contest, leaving Sir to reach his own last-minute epiphany.

Director Nielsen referees the proceedings with a wit that masks the flimsy whimsy and antique sociology as far as possible. His cast is delightful, with both leads ideal. As Sir, Leake has far more voice than Broadway originator Cyril Ritchard, conniving with panache. McMahon's marvelous Cocky matches him shtick for shtick, wisely avoiding a Newley imitation while using his free upper register and neon-sign eyes to heart-stopping, house-shaking effect.

"Greasepaint" is hardly a great musical, yet in such endearing company, it plays as though it were, which is some kind of winning strategy.