

REVIEW--*Westward, Whoa!*

by Mary Winski

"Whoa! That was good!" I thought as the applause finally quieted on closing night. The Heritage Hunt Little Theater's latest hit, *Westward, Whoa!* had just made history as the third success in a row for our senior adult theater. It made me glad to learn "how the West was fun."

What gave everyone in the three sellout audiences such appreciative pleasure? Was it Bets Knepley's fantastic directing and producing? The backup of her assistant and musical director Aileen Drennan? The talent of the cast? The great supporting players? The dedicated labor of the crew beyond and behind the stage? Or was it that these productions unite us all in pride and fun?

The names! Who wouldn't want to be "Chuck Wagon" instead of Alan, "Candy Kane" not just Sandy. "Sue Flay" rather than Beth? Ya gotta love "Virginia and Glazed Hamm" and aspire to the exotic "Juanita Fandango." Who wouldn't hiss at the evil "Snake" or be swept up by the clean brooms of the "Splinter" siblings?

The action! How masterfully the actors thickened the rootin tootin plot as the wagon train broke down, news of the dastardly Snake spread, outlaws plotted in their hideout while the townspeople, army and judge tried to restore law and order. A missing necklace, a valuable land grant, innocent citizens robbed at (cap)gun point. And behind it all, budding romance contrasted with temptation. All culminated in a tension-filled shoot out at low noon. Perfect.

The sets and choreography! The two complemented each other in an aesthetic of scene and movement. The backdrops were vivid and artful. The three or four couples who danced their graceful rhythms transitioned foreground and background smoothly. The can can girls brought lively whistles and stomps and the "El Fandango" played to a room swaying in its chairs.

The whole evening was choreographed from beginning to end. Even before dinner we were greeted by circulating actors and actresses who steadfastly stayed in character, handing out written and verbal Vinegar Bottle propaganda to get us into the spirit early. Just when the bread pudding (dinner was good!) plates were cleared, in they marched again giving us a second preview of the positive energy and entertainment to come. Both entrances mingled taste and talent. And when the show ended with wild applause and flowers and thanks, it proved Bets' assertion that it takes a whole village to put on a show!

Maybe that was it. The audience felt so included in the talented dancing and singing and acting and producing and directing and lighting and staging and sound. We felt like a village led by great and gutsy pioneers, willing to put themselves out there for our enjoyment and good will. By the time Wild Bill Hiccup asks toward the end, "What am I doing here?" we were all ready with our answer, "having a good time." Surrounded by family and friends, we hugged and made our ways home to a community changed in profound and positive ways by performance. Thank you to everyone who makes our Little Theater so big.