

'Black Patent Leather' gleams on stage

By Ethel Simmons
staff writer

"Do Black Patent Leather Shoes Really Reflect Up?" is sort of a Catholic version of "Grease." It's bright and bouncy and ought to pull big crowds for its long run, through May 10, at the Birmingham Theatre.

The show, which has been playing to sold-out houses for two years in Chicago, brought a second company to Birmingham, in a pre-Broadway engagement. Opening night March 18 followed previews since March 13 and played to a full, responsive house.

Growing up Catholic is what "Patent Leather" is all about, and the cast of young performers zestily sing and dance their way through the traumas of grammar and high school.

Four boys, four girls, four nuns and a priest comprise the cast. The plot re-

review

volves around Eddie Ryan (Scott Ellis), who returns to his old Catholic grammar school and begins reminiscing about classmates, school days and the religious education he received there.

RED-HEADED Chloe Webb is particularly appealing as Virginia Lear, mugging her way with a screwed-up face and hair as a tomboyish 7-year-old in the early scenes, and later as a jazzy parochial schoolgirl who'd love to break the rules but barely dares because of her Catholic upbringing.

With the other girls and guys, she dances up a storm in a high school

sequence that takes place during gym class. This is one of the slickest numbers in the show, the boys each seeing themselves as "The Mad Bomber" out to stir up excitement while the girls plan on "Saving Ourselves for Marriage."

The two songs and dances are done simultaneously in the separate gym classes.

The show's choreography by Ronna Kaye is simple, fresh and direct. For the title song "Do Black Patent Leather Shoes Really Reflect Up?" the kids wear shiny, broad-toed black patent leather clown shoes. They lie down on the stage to wiggle their feet in the air to the music.

Timmy Favrell as Louie Schlang, the fat boy, makes the most of a fantasy rock number, during the Freshman Fall Frolic. He grabs the mike to sing

"Doo-Waa, Doo-Wee" with rock star power before reality returns the kids to their shy, hanging-back selves.

ELLEN CRAWFORD as Sister Lee, the short, old, crochety nun, is a scene-stealer. Rightfully, she has her own scene, explaining in song to a little fat girl that "There Are Some" who are cute and some who are not.

Sister Lee winds up telling the child, "There are no cookie cutters in heaven" and that each of us is unique.

As Father O'Reilly, big, cheerful Wally Engelhardt locks the perfect priest who terrorizes parochial students by his presence alone.

He gets attention in "Confess It," when the youngsters go to their first confession; in "Patron Saints," where he explains to Eddie how they can be of help; and especially in "Private Parts,"

a sex education class for boys who may have reached the stage of carrying dirty pictures around in their wallets.

The girls, meanwhile, are discovering the dilemma of "How Far Is Too Far," in their own class where the nun gives them written instruction sheets of what not to do with boys.

Scott Ellis definitely looks the part of Eddie, kind of a young version of author John R. Powers who wrote both the book on which the show is based and the book of the show. Ellis is a handsome, clean-cut young man who comes across awfully squeaky clean.

HIS CHARACTERIZATION is just a bit too bland. In one sequence, Eddie accuses his girlfriend of always being in the company of guys who are pure and homogenized, like Pat Boone. He's almost a dead ringer for Boone himself.

The songs he's given to sing aren't too exciting either. His best song is the one Eddie sings at the end, "Thank God" ("I will never be so young again.")

Eddie's girlfriend is smoothly portrayed by dark-haired Tracy Dordtill as Becky Bakowski, the little fat girl who slims down while growing up. She does nicely on her ballads, especially "God Loves" ("Little fat girls, too.")

Sister Helen, the statuesque nun, is portrayed by Marina MacNeal, who has a lovely voice, heard expressively in "The Greatest Gift" ("of innocence").

The other young people are played with verve by Don Stitt as leering Felix Lindor, Kenny D'Aquila as muscular Mike Depki, Chris Kahler as goody-goody Mary Kenny and wholesome blonde Leah Green as Nancy Halansky.

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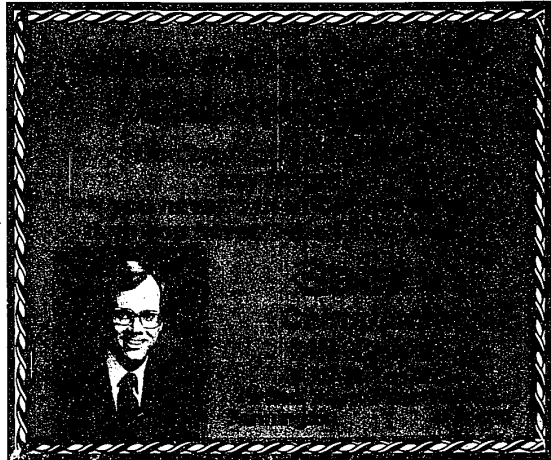
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