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‘Charlotte Squawks’ and we crack up

The first “Charlotte Squawks” was meant to be the last.

Back in 2004, the cutups behind this satirical revue – shameless impresario Keith Martin, clever lyricist Brian Kahn, WFAE-FM's Mike Collins and the rest of the cast – figured they'd exhausted all the comic possibilities of Charlotte-area politics, sports and culture.

How many more sex scandals, eccentric characters and general absurdities could the Queen City (and the nation at large, a secondary “Squawks” target) have to offer?

Now in its fifth year, for better or worse, the answer appears to be: How many do you want?

“You people keep giving us new material,” Collins told Thursday's giddy opening-night crowd for “Charlotte Squawks Pleads the Fifth,” in McGlohon Theatre. “Please stop!”

In that same introductory sequence, set to a bouncy tune from the musical “Hairspray,” Collins and company explain “Squawks” for any virgins in attendance:

“It's a parody song attack / It's my radio show on crack.”

That pretty much says it all. And it's true, this fifth, stronger-than-average “Squawks” outing reflects an embarrassment of riches for songmeister Kahn and his fellow smart alecks. They always get the last laugh, from such local dustups as Nick Mackey's doomed run for sheriff and the City of Concord's costly surrender to racetrack baron Bruton Smith, to such national spectacles as the fall of N.Y. Gov. Elliot Spitzer and a Democratic presidential primary some thought would never end.

We laugh, too.

When Kahn's lyrics fall short of hilarious, his PowerPoint slide-show usually makes up the difference. As singer Kashana Brown channels Aretha Franklin in “R-E-D-N-E-C-K,”



DIEDRA LAIRD – dlaird@charlotteobserver.com

1/21/07 "Let's Go Start a Fight" recounts the skirmishes and fisticuffs that broke out in Center City Charlotte after the fireworks display the last Fourth of July. Set to the Mary Poppins tune "Let's Go Fly a Kite," the musical number features l-r Brian Kahn, Mike Collins, Kevin Harris, Alan Morgan and Robbie Jaeger. Scene from a dress rehearsal for "Charlotte Squawks," the comedy revue about Charlotte. Keith Martin is one of the creators. Diedra Laird-dlaird@charlotteobserver.com

for instance, we get an outrageous series of images: buck-toothed NASCAR fans, beer bellies that ought not to exist in nature, a baby duct-taped to a refrigerator.

Martin's staging, too, boasts clever touches – as in the Spitzer homage, “What I Did for Love,” when the actor photos used as props in “A Chorus Line's” original production are replaced here by placards spelling out the word I-N-D-I-C-T-E-D. Cast member LouAnn Vaughn assisted with the funny, sometimes risqué choreography. Others in this appealing “Squawks” ensemble: Bobby Tyson, Kevin Harris, Robbie Jaeger, Alan Morgan, Carmen Shultz and Beth Troutman.

Sure, some gags misfire. The show's second half in particular beats such dead horses as Starbucks, HMOs and the difficulty of redeeming air miles for free flights, while a ditty on sub-prime mortgages hits too close to home to be funny.

The night revives, though, with a medley inspired by the Hush-Hush prostitution ring (“Charlotte Has a Whorehouse In It!”/“Who's In the Book of Love?”), and with “On My Own,” a sweet song from “Les Misérables” in which Panthers receiver Steve Smith (impersonated by the talented Tyson) mourns the absence of Jake Delhomme and Julius Peppers: “Without them, the team around me falters / I start to cry just like a guy broke down by Barbara Walters.”

At its best, “Charlotte Squawks Pleads the Fifth” has us wiping away tears of a different kind.