

## TPT'S 'Midvale High School 50th' hits all right notes

By David A. Sargent Special to the Sun Journal  
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LEWISTON — Some people love them; some people hate them. High school reunions stir up all kinds of emotions, and The Public Theatre's current production of "The Midvale High School 50th Reunion" explores a number of confrontations between the past and the present.

It's the Maine premiere of this delightful romantic comedy that takes us back to the 1950s.

Joyce Cohen and Mel Shrawder deliver fine performances as the former high school classmates who find a lot in common as they reconnect after 50 years.

It all takes place at the high school reunion, and the story line is amplified by a series of flashbacks.

Bettina, the class valedictorian, and Tom, who was an unpopular loner in high school, discover that new roads appear for them as they fill in the blanks in each other's lives.

One of the principal scenes deals with the familiar challenge of getting on the dance floor. Bettina is reluctant, but Tom has taken dance lessons and he convinces her to follow his lead. The brief ballroom dance scene is charming. Both actors said they spent a lot of serious time rehearsing the dancing, and their effort was effective.

Director Christopher Schario said, "This play is an unsentimental look at the roads we do and don't take in our lives, and a hopeful reminder that it's never too late to make new choices, or even to fall in love."

Mel Shrawder, who plays middle-aged Tom Terres, recently completed a two-year European tour in "West Side Story." His television and film work includes appearances in "Law and Order," "Miami Vice," and "Critical Condition" with Richard Pryor.

Joyce Cohen delivers a fine performance as Bettina in mid-life. She has previously appeared at The Public Theatre in "Humble Boy" and she just finished a successful off-Broadway run of the new play, "America Is Hard To See."

Young Bettina is played by Nisi Sturgis. In addition to her acting work in New York and with numerous regional theaters, she appeared for five seasons as June Thompson on HBO's "Boardwalk Empire."

Torsten Hillhouse, who portrays young Tom, has extensive experience in New York and regional theaters and was last seen at The Public Theatre in "Ripcord."

Flashbacks are woven through the real time of the high school reunion. They show us an ambitious Bettina pursuing a career in science, only to encounter the "glass ceiling." Likewise, an earnest young Tom struggles to articulate his emotional life.

As the evening progresses, both Tom and Bettina become increasingly aware of the growing spark between them.

Under the direction of Christopher Schario, The Public Theatre's executive/artistic director, this show hits all the right notes as it creates memories that ring true.

The middle-aged characters played by Shrawder and Cohen are well-matched by the same characters at a younger age played by Sturgis and Hillhouse.

Although only four actors are seen on stage, the illusion of a crowded high school reunion is effectively created.

"The Midvale High School 50th Reunion" was written by Alan Brody. He is a highly prolific award-winning playwright who began as a novelist. He says that he keeps coming back to writing for the theater because he is struck by the magic "what if."

Lighting design by Heather Crocker is well done. It's important to maintain good timing and direction as the numerous stage locations are lit for various scenes.

