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Mountain Community Theater's 'The Spitfire Grill' struggles to ignite



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March 10, 2026

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Mountain Community Theater's production of "The Spitfire Grill" features a committed cast and a striking woodland set, but the gentle musical struggles to generate dramatic momentum. Standout performances from Kathryn Adkins and Mindy Pedlar provide bright moments in a production that never quite ignites.

Mountain Community Theater's production of "The Spitfire Grill" sets out to tell a gentle story of redemption and renewal in a small Wisconsin town, but the evening struggles to generate the emotional momentum the story requires.

Co-directed by Greg Fritsch and Cathy D. Warner, the musical centers on Percy, recently released from prison. Hoping to start over, she arrives in the fictional town of Gilead, Wisconsin. At the struggling Spitfire Grill, run by the tough but weary Hannah, Percy slowly carves out a place for herself. She befriends Shelby, trapped in an unhappy marriage, and proposes an unusual plan to revive the diner: an essay contest whose winner inherits the grill.

If you go

Who: Mountain Community Theater
What: "The Spitfire Grill"
When: Through April 5
Where: Park Hall, 9400 Mill St., Ben Lomond
Tickets: [Click here](#)

The musical was adapted from the 1996 independent film written and directed by Lee David Zlotoff. Starring Alison Elliott, Marcia Gay Harden and Ellen Burstyn, the film earned a devoted following for its story of forgiveness and second chances. Composer James Valcq and lyricist Fred Alley brought the story to the stage in 2001 as a small-scale musical with a folk-influenced score and intimate ensemble cast. Since its Off-Broadway debut, "The Spitfire Grill" has become a popular choice for regional and community theaters drawn to its modest production needs and themes of healing and renewal.

That is the promise the musical makes.

The cast as a whole possesses clear dedication to the material, approaching the show with sincerity and professionalism. Still, the evening ultimately raises the question of whether "The Spitfire Grill" itself provides enough dramatic fuel to sustain a full musical evening

Although the directors' program notes stress the play's themes of honesty, courage and hope, the result on stage feels muted. Translating that quiet story requires a delicate balance of character depth, pacing and visual storytelling that keeps audiences invested in the journey.



From left, Kathryn Adkins as Hannah, John Wasielewski as Joe and Emerson Kapture as Percy in Mountain Community Theater's "The Spitfire Grill." Credit: Benjamin Canant

From the outset, I questioned whether the issue was the script or the staging. The story moves deliberately, but often feels stagnant and predictable. Most challenging is that the characters rarely develop beyond stereotypes. The script sketches them broadly, offering little complexity and leaving motivations and relationships thin.

Throughout the evening, the score settles into a persistent musical tone and fails to deliver a standout moment. Few songs distinguish themselves with character or momentum. As a result, the show tends to feel longer than its actual running time.

Staging does little to address this issue. Many musical numbers unfold with actors standing stationary, reminiscent of the old theatrical joke about singers who "park and bark." Musical theater thrives on movement and visual storytelling, which are largely absent here.

A few moments hinted at what might have been. Percy's dream sequence briefly injects a burst of theatrical life, imagining the kitchen erupting into activity as she frantically dances through a comic whirlwind of food prep. The energetic opening of Act 2 offers another jolt of movement. Unfortunately, these moments prove the exception, and the production soon settles back into a more static rhythm.

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None of this reflects poorly on the cast, who worked earnestly with the material they were given. Several performances stood out.

Kathryn Adkins delivers the evening's most grounded performance as Hannah, the gruff owner of the Spitfire Grill. It is a pleasure to see Adkins back on stage after many years. She brings authority, warmth, and a seasoned musical presence, allowing her songs to land even when the material itself feels subdued. Adkins understands how to shape a musical moment and hold an audience's attention.

Mindy Pedlar provides welcome comic relief as Effy, the town's watchful postmistress and unofficial gossip. Pedlar's timing and relaxed stage presence give the show some of its lighter moments, and she is consistently enjoyable to watch.

Luna Lau, as Shelby, has a lovely voice and her Act 2 songs stand out, revealing vocal warmth and emotional sincerity.

In the central role of Percy, Emerson Kapture approaches the character with admirable energy and commitment. The role requires a careful emotional arc as Percy moves from guarded outsider to someone willing to trust again, however the production offers limited direction in shaping her arc, leaving the character feeling somewhat static in the early scenes.

The supporting ensemble rounds out the world of Gilead with solid vocal work throughout the evening. Brad Aiello appears as Caleb, Shelby's troubled husband, while John Wasielewski plays Joe, the quiet local sheriff whose compassion becomes an important thread in Percy's story. Scott Kravitz completes the cast as the mysterious Eli, whose presence in the woods surrounding the town gradually reveals one of the musical's central secrets. Each brings sincerity to the stage, contributing to the small town community that anchors the story.

One area where the production clearly excels is in its visual design. Brad Roades' set is striking, with tall trees rising behind the diner and framing the stage like a quiet Wisconsin forest pressing in around the town. Lyndsey Gould's lighting works beautifully with the set, shaping the space and adding atmosphere as the story shifts between the diner and the woods beyond. Together, the design elements create a handsome environment that adds a welcome dimension to the stage. One only wishes the staging had taken fuller advantage of that evocative setting.

With the vast range of musicals available to community theaters today, this particular choice feels curious. In a story built around the power of renewal, this production ultimately struggles to kindle the spark that would make that transformation feel real. Although noble in intention it ultimately leaves the audience wishing for a more profound sense of catharsis — a testament to how difficult it is to bring quiet hope to truly vivid life onstage.