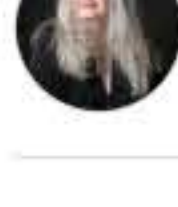


ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

'Reefer Madness' is a blast – if you can hear it



BY JANA MARCUS April 7, 2026

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A spirited and entertaining "Reefer Madness" from Renegade Theater Company at the Veterans Memorial Building in downtown Santa Cruz features a talented cast and sharp visual design, but overpowering sound mutes the lyrics and blurs the show's comic bite.

Here's a confession. When I was 10 years old, I was in love with Donny and the Osmond Brothers. I knew every word to "Yo-Yo" and "One Bad Apple."

My father took me to see them at the Oakland Coliseum in 1972. From our nosebleed seats, I was ecstatic.

Then the lights went down. The Osmonds hit the stage in sequined jumpsuits, and 60,000 teenagers started screaming. They screamed so loudly for the entire set that I couldn't hear the music.

I remember turning to my dad and asking, "Are they singing?"

So yes, I saw the Osmonds live. But I did not hear them.

Flash forward to last Friday night at the Veterans Memorial Building in downtown Santa Cruz, where Renegade Theater Company presented "Reefer Madness: The Musical."

Entering the hall, I immediately clocked the five-piece band set up on the floor at the audience's right, directly in front of the seating area. It was the kind of choice that makes you brace yourself. I moved as far left as possible, unprepared for how familiar that experience would feel.

If you go

Who: Renegade Theater Company
What: "Reefer Madness"
When: Through April 20
Where: Veterans Memorial Building, 846 Front St., Santa Cruz
Tickets: [Click here](#)

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"Reefer Madness: The Musical" is based on the 1936 exploitation film "Reefer Madness," a piece of anti-marijuana propaganda so wildly exaggerated that it eventually became a cult classic. What was once intended as a moral warning has, over time, been embraced for its unintentional humor. The stage musical, created many decades later, leans fully into that absurdity, transforming fear-based messaging into gleeful satire, complete with high-energy musical numbers and deliberately overblown storytelling about the "green leaf assassin."

The narrative is framed as a lecture to concerned parents, followed by increasingly ridiculous cautionary tales as wholesome teenagers descend into chaos after a single encounter with reefer.

At the center are Jimmy Harper and Mary Lane, whose innocent lives spiral into melodrama, crime and hysteria, as we are told that marijuana makes a fiend of boys in only 30 days. The joke, of course, is not subtle. Every consequence is outsized. Every moment pushes further than the last, until the entire thing teeters on the edge of pandemonium.

Renegade's production is a lively, committed and genuinely entertaining evening of theater. The company has assembled a cast of more than 20 performers, many of whom bring strong vocal ability and a clear understanding of the show's heightened, comic style. This is not a piece that rewards subtlety; the company wisely embraces the exaggeration.

Tyler Savin anchors the evening as The Lecturer, guiding the audience through the unfolding lunacy with a polished, confident performance. He moves comfortably between narration, song, and movement, providing a steady throughline in a show that thrives on chaos.

At the center of the story, M.C. Mendonca's Mary Lane and Raven Voorhees' Jimmy Harper carry the emotional arc, embracing both the innocence and the escalating insanity of their characters' journeys. Around them, Lauren Chouinard, Juno Aliah and Ana Bogren deliver standout supporting performances, each carving out distinct moments within the show's heightened world.



Raven Voorhees as Jimmy Harper and M.C. Mendonca as Mary Lane are overwhelmed by the clutches of the "green leaf assassin," otherwise known as marijuana. Credit: Zed Warner

Even the ensemble, though not always perfectly in sync in the larger dance numbers, commits fully. There is a sense throughout that this is a group willing to go all in, which is exactly what this material demands.

And then there is Gage Herendeen.

Herendeen, who has been quietly stealing scenes across recent productions, including Lurch in "The Addams Family" and "Spring Awakening" in 2025, does it again here. As Jesus, he is wheeled through the audience on a towering cross before launching into the gleefully absurd "Listen to Jesus, Jimmy" in a sequin loincloth. It is a ridiculous moment, and he lands it with total commitment, earning one of the biggest reactions of the night.

Under the direction of Miguel Reyna, with choreography by Babe Payne, the staging makes energetic use of the hall. The action flows well, and the production maintains a strong sense of forward momentum, even as the narrative veers into lunacy.

The design elements further support the production's strengths. Costume designer Shimona Miller delivers one of the evening's most successful contributions, with detailed 1940s-inspired looks paired with over-the-top chorus costumes, including sequined showpieces and leafy marijuana-themed outfits that fully embrace the satire. Lighting designer Asher Hildebrand adds texture and playfulness, while scenic designers Jay Duffy and Gennevie "Q" Herbranson create a flexible environment that supports the show's rapid transitions.

The band is fantastic, led by Elena Correa with Tammy Duplantis on keyboards, Kyle Hurlbert on electric guitar, Zach Latham on bass, Scott Nordgren on alto sax and clarinet and Chris Salem on drums, playing with energy and style. Musically, they are tight and expressive.

Which brings us back to that first impression upon entering the hall.

Though the performers were mic'd, the band's placement and volume created a persistent, difficult-to-overcome imbalance. For much of the evening, vocals were overpowered, and lyrics, so essential to the show's absurdity and storytelling, were often lost.

In a musical like "Reefer Madness," where so much of the comedy lives in the precision of the lyrics, that loss is significant. One can follow the general arc, but the wit depends on clarity.

There were brief moments when the musical texture thinned, particularly in quieter sections led primarily by keyboard, where the vocals came through, and the hilarity landed. But once the full band returned, especially with guitar and drums, the balance tipped again.

Boosting actors' mics rather than shaping the overall sound only creates sonic competition.

The sound problem might have been fixed by buffering the band using sound shells or placing them upstage behind the performers. That might have gone a long way toward restoring balance.

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By Act 2, I had retreated to the back of the hall, tissue in my ears, trying to mitigate the volume. It did little to improve clarity.

I found myself turning to my friends and asking, "Can you hear them singing?"

I already knew the answer.

And that is what makes the experience frustrating. Because there is so much here that works. The cast is committed. The performances are strong. The design shows care. The audience, for its part, was clearly engaged, even shouting back at the stage during the increasingly outrageous turns of the second act.

But for this reviewer, the inability to consistently hear lyrics and dialogue made it difficult to fully connect with the humor driving the piece.

I give them an A for effort.

In the end, just like my night with the Osmonds, I saw the show – unfortunately, I just didn't hear it.