

# VPA brings sassy South to the Valley

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WASILLA There's stiff competition at the ceramic exhibit and the town's drunken first lady is dead. The local tramp is on the prowl and a homely pig farmer is her target. A sudden wedding of the town's hairdresser and her honest country man is underway and a bumpkin woman's baby is about to be delivered.

Just another day at the county fair.

Welcome to Mineola, a small town located somewhere in the middle of nowhere in the South, where a colorful collection of good old country folk gather at the Faith County Fairgrounds for the annual county fair. It's a place where beehive hairdos are still the rage, the rum cake is 100 proof, tabloids are the news and hoop earrings are still the height of fashion. There's never a shortage of laughs as the curtain goes up at the Valley Performing Arts Center (VPA) production of "Faith County," starting tonight.

Written by Mark Landon Smith, "Faith County" debuted in 1991 as a radio play before hitting the stage. It was even featured on NBC's "Dateline."

"Faith County" is Steel Magnolias without the tragedy and with more laughs. The play magnifies the southern stereotypes of gum-smacking trashy women, head-scratching rednecks and poor fashion sense, mixed with small town togetherness and camaraderie. VPA's end result is a rip-roaring trip through the southern belt of America or at least how some may perceive it to be.

"Faith County is a hilarious look at life in a small town in the South," said Rachel Underwood, director of the play.

Underwood returns to VPA after a 12-year break to direct and star in what promises to be VPA's funniest stage show this season. For Underwood, working with a close group of actors has been a major bonus to directing "Faith County."

"There's a naturalness and camaraderie with this group," Underwood said. "We all have had to endure some kind of personal issues that we've had to work out. One of our actors [was] injured on the ice, babies were born. There were things we had to work out that ended up bringing us closer together. The result is good chemistry and when these guys have fun on stage, the audience has fun."

The nine-member cast includes newcomers and familiar faces to VPA's productions, including first-timer Connie Perkins, who has volunteered for 10 years on the sets and as a member of the board of directors at VPA, but has never performed lines on stage until now.

Perkins plays Gladys Pimbleton, the mayor's wife who drinks too much, evident by the pungent rum cake she brings to the county fair.

"Learning the lines with the stage movement was a bit tricky," Perkins said. "Rachel bugged me to play this part, which was the only part I was really interested in playing, so I auditioned."

Newcomer Ruth Josten fills the part of Ruthann Barnes, an uptight preacher's wife. Josten's calm presence fits her character's southern moral demeanor like a glove.

Tammy McCallion plays Faye McFaye, the county's flirtatious and bubbly poet laureate, with unbounded genius. She takes classless and tacky to a new level. With her black bra straps showing and Enquirer magazine in hand as she gallivants around the fairgrounds in pursuit of farmers, McCallion makes Britney Spears look like a nun.

Mineola's hairdresser and town gossip, Naomi Farkle (Niki Pease), and sensible yet nosy Mildred Carson (Yvonne Oliver) are each other's best friend and worst enemy. Underneath the back-and-forth verbal spitting lies a sister-like quality that is quite identifiable. Lofty performances by both Pease and Carson make for some memorable scenes.

VPA's comedic shoo-in, Dave Nufer, plays pig farmer Delbert Fink, the object of Faye McFaye's affection. Nufer previously appeared in "Beauty and the Beast" and this season's "Hound of the Baskervilles."

In many scenes throughout "Faith," Nufer exudes pure country charisma, John Deere hat and all. In one scene, Fink tries to let McFaye's advances down smoothly, stuttering that he has interest in another woman, but his courageous efforts fall short with McFaye's incessant whining and grumbling. McFaye, feeling as if she had been dumped by Fink, reads a poem about her lost love at the talent show while Fink looks on in confusion. It's nothing but nonsense turned to laughs.

"Faith County's" behind-the-scenes team also has a few new faces taking the wheel in sound and set engineering, playing pivotal roles in the production's southern appeal.

Erik Deeter, a local Valley artist, provided the backdrop for the county fair, adding radiant outdoor colors to the sounds of tractors, pigs and general fairground noises to make the scenes in "Faith County" priceless.

"I think people will like the characters and their realness," Underwood said. "With all that we've been through as individuals during this production, the word 'faith' has a little more true meaning in my belief."

"Faith County" premieres tonight at 8 at the Valley Performing Arts Center's Machetanz Theater in Wasilla. Tickets are \$14 to \$16 a person. For a full list of show times, visit [Valleyperformingarts.org](http://Valleyperformingarts.org).