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Theater: Ladies lend subtlety to 'Whorehouse'

10:42 AM CDT on Sunday, October 1, 2006

By **LAWSON TAITTE** / The Dallas Morning News

The best thing about Contemporary Theatre of Dallas' *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* is all those women, which seems entirely appropriate.

Contemporary opened its new season with the 1978 musical hit about a ruckus in the press about the Chicken Ranch, a house of ill repute in Central Texas. Pretty much everybody over 12 in the state knew about the century-old establishment, but a pretentious Houston TV journalist decided to make it an issue.

Larry L. King wrote a famous satirical article in a national magazine, which he and Peter Masterson adapted for the stage. Carol Hall's score combines the best of

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MATT NAGER/DMN

Ted Wold (front, with Stephen Bates, Jason Driggers, Chad Peterson and Don High) milks his role as a TV journalist in Contemporary Theatre's *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*.

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show music and the real country thing.

Contemporary's production, reviewed Saturday, reminds you of the show's original off-Broadway incarnation. Director James Paul Lemons takes full advantage of the intimate space by encouraging his actors, especially the females, to create subtle emotional detail.

In truth, the men don't have much opportunity. Two of the important roles are grotesques. Ted Wold wrings all the laughs out of the reporter's shenanigans, and Brian Loncar – in his stage debut – dances the feckless Governor's "Sidestep" gleefully (though his singing is rudimentary). Among the men, only Charles Ryan Roach, as the sheriff who has long protected the Chicken Ranch but is now forced to crack down, has a realistic character to play. He's a very different type from the usual – more comedic and blustery – but he gives his big song, "Good Old Girl," a deeply feeling performance and (another change from the usual) sings it all out.

And, ah, the women! Natalie King as the house's maid and Sara Shelby-Martin as a waitress who secretly envies the prostitutes' sexual adventures bring the house down with their solos. All nine performers playing the, er, staff of the institution in question radiate sexuality without playing to stereotype.

But this musical stands or falls on the performance of the actress playing Miss Mona, the house's proprietress. Jenny Thurman, whose powerful voice is a given and a gift to the audience, outdoes herself this time. She too defies stereotype. Miss Mona doesn't want to be called a madam, and Ms. Thurman doesn't play her as one. She's a tough and savvy country girl who has worked her way up in the world but has good sense and a good heart. Ms. Thurman doesn't sentimentalize her situation, but by the time the show is over she has occasioned plenty of sentiment.

Ms. Thurman sings the show's final song in

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a spotlight, centerstage. She's better than a hokey grand finale every time.

E-mail ltaitte@dallasnews.com

Through Oct. 29 at Contemporary Theatre of Dallas, 5601 Sears St. Runs 150 mins. \$27, discounts available. 214-828-0094, www.contemporarytheatreofdallas.com.

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