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'Shear Madness' is off-the-cuff hilarity

by Laguna Beach Coastline Pilot

Among the many varieties of stage comedy, undoubtedly the toughest to pull off successfully is improvisation, which depends in large measure on the response of the audience. When it works, however, improv can be exceptionally entertaining.

It works – and superbly well – at the Laguna Playhouse, where the off-the-cuff and off-the-wall production of "Sheer Madness" will be both entertaining playgoers and soliciting their input for the rest of the summer.

Just as the verdict in "The Night of January 16th" can go either way depending on the whims of the audience "jurors," so also can the guilty party in "Sheer Madness" turn out to be any one of three, perhaps four, suspects – it's all up to the audience.

But before we arrive at this point, the six actors have thrust themselves into an exhausting project which, from about the play's midpoint, is particularly heavy on improvisation. They're well rehearsed to follow any leads or turn the story in any direction, all in accordance with the response of the playgoers.

"Shear Madness" takes place in a hair salon – not just any beauty shop, but one located on Mermaid Street in Laguna Beach – and the malleable script abounds with topical humor. An unseen character upstairs has been murdered, and two local gendarmes are hot on the case, firing questions at the four people who were in the salon at the time of the crime.

Director Chris Tarjan not only has drilled his company meticulously, he also plays the lead detective, virtually taking over the production from about halfway into the first act. And if this weren't enough, he also holds court outside at intermission, soliciting the input of various playgoers.

Tarjan delivers a bullet-paced performance, asserting his authority with aplomb. His only failing is his tendency to enjoy the show as much as the audience, breaking up occasionally while exchanging malapropisms with the suspects.

Since the show is set in a beauty parlor, it's a given that one of the characters has to be outrageously gay. That would be the shop owner and head stylist, played unerringly by Joe Sampson, who makes Ross, the intern on *The Tonight Show*, appear as macho as Clint Eastwood. Sampson has been playing this wildly funny character for 10 years in various incarnations of "Shear Madness," and he has it down to a science.

Robin Long, a former NFL cheerleader, is a standout as the other hair stylist who may or may not be the killer, depending on which night you attend. Long has a figure as perfect as her delivery and is the most watchable person onstage.

Laguna veteran Kevin Symons splendidly enacts a smooth, suspicious antiques dealer whose covert movements draw myriad suspicions. Tacey Adams is equally mysterious as a wealthy socialite with a predictably shadowed past, and Brett Ryback provides staunch support as Tarjan's deputy.

Bruce Goodrich's beauty salon setting is exceptionally colorful as are Julie Keen's costumes, both well illuminated by Paulie Jenkins' lighting design. Veteran TV newsman Ed Arnold provides the voice of a radio reporter covering the crime.

Come to "Shear Madness" prepared to take abundant mental notes so that you may be instrumental in bringing the killer to justice. One probability is that, in the process, you'll die laughing.