Humor has a dark side in ‘Escaping Queens’

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APTOS — Mingling fact with fiction, Joe Ortiz’s musical memoir “Escaping Queens” lays it all out on the line in an intimate way, from the serious family problems, to the goofy lightheartedness.

While “Escaping Queens” might come across as a light family comedy on the surface, a much darker, sinister core is ever-present. The man of the house, Herman (played by Darin Dailey), means well by trying to support his family, but his addiction to gambling jeopardizes the entire family’s well-being, left alone paying the rent. His frequent womanizing only further tears him apart from the family.

But the musical is not all dark and depressing. The cheerful “Mama’s Little Kitchen” score that opens the first act and the hopeful “Coney” set a tone of aspiration right off the bat, although the rest of the act slowly dwindles down into a feeling of despair as Herman’s life spins out of control. The hope that was so prominent early on doesn’t fully return until the second act with “California.”

Being performed in the smaller Black Box Theater at Cabrillo College allowed for the actors to interact with the crowd. During the just plain bizarre “Herman’s Medley” scene, Mama (Lori Rivera), Laura (Ariel Buck) and Little Joey (Wyatt Bernard) sat on the steps in the middle aisle, often conversing with members of the audience.

After the performance was finished, Mama passed around a jar asking for money, which prompted much improvisation on Rivera’s part (“Pale money, OK?”). The crowd interaction makes you feel like an active participant in the musical, not merely watching it. It kept me on my toes, especially since I was sitting on an end seat. Would I be brought out on center stage? Thankfully, that never happened, but the anticipation added another dimension to the musical, something that couldn’t be as easily done in a larger setting.

It was surprising how many scenes were constructed out of such a minimalist set. The kitchen scene dominates the first act and half of the second, and a light post off to the side of the set is designated for an “outside” scene, and captures that environment quite effectively. When the family finally escapes Queens, an entirely different set is created, just by turning the props around, such as the refrigerator and dishwasher. It was a very clever use of a limited space.

“Escaping Queens” has a variety of foot-tapping, hand-clapping tunes that will have you humming and singing them for days to come. The doo-wop, Latin, jazz and more is masterfully integrated into the action.

While the cast lacks in size (seven all together), it works to the musical’s advantage. Every character has a reason to be in the musical, and all are essential to the plot. Kudos to Josiah Frampton and Nadia Deliye Lewis, who each played two entirely different characters over the course of the musical.

But it was Bernard who completely stole the show. While his role throughout the musical was sparse compared to, for example, Mama and Laura, his actions, without fail, either provoked laughter or applause from the audience.

“Sicilia,” the second to last song in the musical, was Bernard’s breakout performance that you knew had to happen.

“Escaping Queens” has the wit, depth and energy to make it a fantastic addition to the Cabrillo Stage lineup. The musical runs through Aug. 10. Those who have already purchased tickets should consider themselves lucky, as the musical sold out months ago.