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'Tony n' Tina's Wedding' full of unbridled laughter

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We have all received that special wedding announcement. It doesn't matter if the invitation is tacky, creative or both, it's always flattering to be involved in a couple's big day. And while it is a live performance, "Tony n' Tina's Wedding," now playing through Feb. 28 at The **Grove** Theatre, is no exception. Never before has the energy and awkwardness, celebration and embarrassment of a wedding event been so nicely packaged into one evening.

"Tony n' Tina's Wedding," is the kind of delicious disaster we have all had the pleasure of attending (or at least hearing about). The difference this time around is that we can laugh out loud when things go horribly wrong. Complete with gaudy decor, obnoxious family members and every cheesy, cliché tradition imaginable, the show takes the audience (who become invited friends and family of the bride and groom) through a hilarious night to remember.

The Utah County debut of this free-for-all play -- originally created by New York improv troupe Artificial Intelligence -- is an evening of improvised dialogue intermingled with scripted mishaps, such as the arrival of Tina's ex-boyfriend and a bridesmaid's horrid rendition of "My Heart Will Go On." The play begins as actors mingle with the audience as if at a wedding. (Warning: If you don't like to be singled out or forced to participate in any number of potentially embarrassing situations, you may want to lay low.)

And even though the cast is entirely real and committed to their individual characters, the audience's willingness to let themselves go will be what makes or breaks this production.

What makes the show so funny is that it could be a real wedding. Well, if we were Italian and lived in New Jersey. But cultural differences aside, we all know how perfect weddings are supposed to be -- and how they actually wind up. The show relies on the improvisational skills of its cast of 22 and a handful of servers, who are also in character.

On opening night, Tony (Josh Curtis) and Tina (Linda Peterson) were in top form. Curtis was loud, brash and charming, while Peterson played Tina as a sweet ingenue with a growing sense of nervous doom. Other standouts on opening night were Joyce Gunther as the mother of the bride, Lisa Giles as Sister Albert Maria, and Jeremy Showgren as Vinnie Black, owner of the reception hall. Peterson and Mike Porenta, playing Tina's brother Joey, had the evening's most hilarious moment as they shared the traditional father-daughter dance. Porenta covered his face with a picture of the siblings' deceased father, while Peterson pathetically bawled.

The "Tony n' Tina's" challenge is to be real and sappy enough without appearing offensive. And the cast does an honorable job of this. Where stereotypes and language had a chance to get racy, the cast pulled back and let the individual audience member choose to recognize and

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appreciate the jokes or not.

At its best, the play is engaging and heartily amusing. The only complaint I had is that the play was set in Utah. And while I'm sure there are a number of staunch Catholic Italian families in the state, it may have seemed less out of place if the show were to transplant the audience to a location where this type of wedding is more abundant. Instead, we have to try and believe a priest stealing a bottle of liquor at the reception is a common Utah County occurrence. But as long as the cast stays fresh and doesn't try to repeat previous performances, every night should prove to be ultimately rewarding.

If you like the idea of joining in a conga line or diving for a tossed bouquet, and you think you might relish watching two dysfunctional families go through a high drama-filled evening just for laughs, then this show is a marriage made in heaven.