

Bright and genteel – without the courage of bad taste

DEBBIE DOES DALLAS

directed by Carl Boukes

Review: Robert Greig

Showbiz gentility hovers over this show, as if the Age of Aquarius was a sin. The staging morality – innuendo, dimmed lights and clothed bodies – in a satire of a porn film – makes one long for the courage of bad taste.

The sounds, music and sights of *Debbie does Dallas – The Musical* all work. The show is bright, smart and sassy; the performances are mostly edgy and inventive; and the staging simple, if impoverished, but effective. One smiles and laughs a lot as in eating candyfloss but is left hungry for substance, not of Ibsen or Shakespeare or Fugard, obviously, but of a work with an inner momentum, not just surface flurry. Ultimately, it is merely a joke repeated, not a bad joke, but the coinage is worn thin by fondling.

The reason is specific: the book –

the story – doesn't live up to the concept. It goes nowhere. Once stated, the same satire is restated, as irritatingly as bird pleased with its one note. And, ultimately, the characters are negligible; what matters is the figures and these are decorously veiled by the staging where the topic demands revelation.

The musical is based on the film (1976) which became, unimaginably, a cult porn classic, along with the successors where Debbie did the world's capitals.

I suppose Debbie's progress is of liberation. Following this, the musical has Debbie as a cheerleader overcoming small-town scruples to audition for the Dallas Cowboys cheerleaders. The musical grew from a bright idea for an off-Broadway show by Susan L Schwartz. The ponderous athleticisms of the porn film are replaced by humour and suggestive symbolism and allusion.

Mostly, *Debbie does Dallas* satirises bimbos, their locale and their American dreams. It is a sustained affectionate joke about cheerleaders (pretty, vacuous); jocks (gross, vacuous); and small towns-

folk (horny, vacuous). It plays insouciantly with obsessions about wrinkled private parts. It is, thus, a detached, affectionate dismissal of a previous generation's investment of meaning in sex. In its own covert way, it redefines the dirty little secrets of porn.

Debbie's aspirations are thwarted by parents who won't fund her. She and her friends turn not quite tricks but near enough to raise the money. They expose the kinks of creepily perverse leading citizens. One owns the hardware – (hardware: get it?) – store where Debbie works. The exposure is less important here than the profit.

The script has the girls communicating in a ready-made language of phrases and gestures – watch any school kids long enough and you'll recognise it. Occasionally they sing, probably the only time you sense you might actually be watching characters rather than drafts of Stepford Wives. The jocks are musclebound, brain dead and hormonally empowered. They bond more with each other than the girls. "Get your finger out of my ass" thus seems a



Tessa Denton, Caprice Bourret, Tanya van Graan, Fern Belling and Busisiwe Lurayi perform in *Debbie Does Dallas*

grateful post-coital utterance.

Debbie does Dallas is crafted to set up jokes, visual and verbal. The craft doesn't extend to plot. True, musicals aren't usually known for narrative coherence. But the form of *Debbie* eerily echoes the meanderings of a small-town American

teenage soliloquising.

Technically, the cast suggest enormous energy and creativity. But talent without a vehicle becomes like words without meaning.

● *Debbie Does Dallas* is on at the Johannesburg Civic Theatre

