

Santa Cruz Actors' Theatre shares American tale with 'Escaping Queens: Over the Roof'



The cast of "Escaping Queens: Over the Roof" bring to life the musical memoir by Joe Ortiz, set for performances through Aug. 2 at the Santa Cruz Actors' Theatre. (Credit — Jana Marcus)

By [Jake Thomas](#)

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Immigration is at the heart of the American story, but it is only part of the pattern of restless movement characteristics of many inhabitants of this land. The pursuit of opportunity has often led people from other parts of the country to relocate to California in pursuit of its golden promises. This is true of the characters in Joe Ortiz's play about his family "Escaping Queens: Over the Roof." Before they could find a footing on the West Coast, however, this spirited brood must survive a turbulent lifestyle in Queens during the '50s.

Bringing this tale to life is a brilliant cast of talented musical actors. From the harmonies of doo-wop to the magical and emotional cantatas of Mama and Rose, the mesmerizing rhythms and the lyrical intonations of the score make this musical a joyous event to experience. The acting is also impressive. Lori Rivera rocks as the center of this familial

maelstrom as Mama, Adam J. Saucedo delivers the morally questionable goods as Herman, Joyce Michaelson wins hearts as Rose, Jennifer Galvin is satisfying as the seductive minx Estelle and Miguel Reyna is fun to watch as the neighborhood gangster Freddie; but it is the youthful half of the cast that really raises eyebrows.

Ian Grant continues a streak of powerful performances, this time as Johnny, love interest to sister Laura. Johnny has a seedy reputation as a bad boy, but he perseveres through his working class path of abuse and menial labor until he discovers an emerging gift in the culinary arts. He plays both ends of this character skillfully, first conflicted by his affection for Laura and his troubled home life, and finally sincere in his intentions to become a respectable member of society worthy of asking for the hand of his beloved. Grant has charisma to spare on stage and he couples this presence with a strong singing voice.



“Escaping Queens: Over the Roof” tells the story of Joe Ortiz and his family surviving a turbulent lifestyle in Queens during the '50s before they could find a footing on the West Coast. (Credit — Jana Marcus)

William Calden continues to evolve, maturing into a talented young actor. With each new production, Calden shows another layer of acting prowess developing. Together with Grant, he plays a '50s greaser with a heart of gold in convincing manner. Ryan Stallings also delivers a praise-worthy performance as young Joey, the “aw-shucks” member of their trio, who goes through some emotional travails as a mama’s boy who loves his father Herman but cannot count on him to be a decent role model.

Kassandra Maita plays the slight but emotionally powerful Laura, the older sister with a courageous heart who is torn between loyalty to her family and a desire to experience the world. These are complex characters wracked with inner conflicts, and these young actors do a great job of making them believable.

This show supports the idea that theater is an actor's medium, with stellar performances across the board. Saucedo has the challenging job of making an unlikable character fun to watch and only through the power of his will are we brought into the world of Herman and his failing exploits. The play deals with difficult topics and Rivera makes her ordeals of betrayal and abuse feel authentic and understandable.

The creative team of directors Greg Fritsch and Cathy D. Warner has created a formidable work of dramatic art under their guidance. Ortiz's autobiographical musical comes to life in the creative costume design of Janet Norton, giving Mama strong maternal vibes with a quaint apron and dress. The clever set design by Greg Fritsch adds a fun urban element to the show. "Escaping Queens" is a polished production that gleams with professionalism and creates a pleasant theater-going experience. The play runs through Aug. 2 at the Santa Cruz Actors' Theatre, with performances at 7 p.m. Thursdays through Fridays and 2 p.m. Sundays. Admission is \$35 and \$32 for seniors and students. Thursday tickets are 2-for-1 (use code 2for1). Find tickets at santacruzactorstheatre.org/tickets.