

You can't say that on NPR

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photo credit: Dave

As the lights beneath the Byzantine dome in McGlohon Theatre dimmed last night and the sixth imagining of the Charlotte Squawks satirical musical franchise began, I was worried. Not for myself. Not for the cast. Not for the creators. But for the audience. I've only been a Charlottean for 18 months, and if I've learned anything it's that this city is built around Trade and Tryon Tension and Solemnity. And there I was: opening night seated amongst a waiting crowd three rows back from the group of actors waiting in the wings rehearsed and ready to mercilessly roast this same city.

Earlier that morning I'd spoken over the phone with Mike Collins, producer and director of this musically-inclined airing of Charlotte's dirty laundry. "It's everything you can't say on NPR," said Collins, who also possesses Charlotte's most recognizable voice signature as host of the "Charlotte Talks" radio show. "If you've been here [in Charlotte] 5 minutes or 50 years, you'll get it," he added.

The barbs in Squawks are mostly local and many times satisfyingly witty. Set to classic tunes with original lyrics, it's surprising to see how many jokes get squeezed from high-powered local players whose embarrassing actions unfolded across a national stage. After a video introduction from Pat McCrory too hilarious to give even a snippet away, the live show began with Collins stretched across the hood of a piano, a stark change from his alter-ego heard on the radio. Though if you're familiar with his friendly enthusiastic approach to doing interviews, maybe this isn't such a stretch. After all, Charlotte keeps requesting more Squawks. Collins glides from speaking to singing without a pause, as if the transition was natural and everyday for him. Could you imagine Collins spontaneously erupting into song over the airwaves? I was struck by his comedic delivery during the show. Good comedy has the air of spontaneity and casual confidence. Collins shares such a presence on stage. But he's not alone up there.

The women run circles around the men in this show, figuratively and literally. Their snappy sparkling energies mix well together. Best vocals go to Susan Roberts Knowlson, hands down. During an operatic tribute to Sonya Sotomayor, recent addition to the US Supreme Court, Knowlson hits notes that may very well break the theater's stained glass before the show ends its run. **Beth Troutman (who shares the sharp beauty and comedic acumen with Kristin Wiig of SNL) absolutely brought down the house as the foul-mouthed news anchor during the "Squawks News" scenes.**

Though the heart and aim is always detectable, some jokey premises didn't have the legs to hold an entire song worth of lyrics. The show also incorporates a multimedia element, a constant best-of-the-web style slideshow projected above the stage. The constant flashing of pictures throughout the show was at times distracting from the live performance, but nice during a slight second act drag. The pictures were always used to hilarious effect as the audience seemed to be more OK with vulgarities of the digital variety during an endless run of castration jokes in the furious-wives-of-recent-philanderers routine.