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## Performance

### STOOL PIGEON

[Stacy Davies](#) Wed. May 27

#### **‘Singing Jailbirds: The Musical’ is an earnest failure**



PHOTO by JOHN MATERRA

It takes a lot of chutzpah to make a socialist musical based on a work by a Pulitzer Prize-winning writer—especially a musical about labor unions. Theoretically, it can work—*Evita* had a bit of that in it, after all, coupled with a much more interesting love triangle. Timing-wise, it certainly seems apropos for a workers’ rights piece touting the brotherly love aspect of the pink party over the oppressive boot of capitalism. Unfortunately, relying too much on revolutionary message can often muck up a worthy vision, and foil any human connection.

Based on Upton Sinclair’s self-published 1924 play, the Relevant Stage’s musical version by writer/director Ray Buffer focuses on a Christ-like metaphor, pitting Red Adams—a San Pedro dock worker or “Wobbler”—against the corporate bosses who want those damn ships loaded regardless of fair pay. Red will be crucified for his rebellious stance, but it’s a stagnant martyrdom: for the first half of the play (which runs in excess of two hours), he is either sitting at a desk answering the district attorney’s questions, or locked up with his buddies in a jail cell—a very authentic looking jail cell, which means we’re peeking through bars to actually see him. He sings a socialist tune at the desk sometimes, or even stands for one directed at his dead wife, but mostly, he’s just in jail—with his back to us. To add a bit of action, some picketers occasionally march onto the sidelines for some very marchy songs. There’s also a lot of talking—with most of the dialogue falling into political

posturing. This leaves zero personal connection to Red or his plight, even though we know we should be feeling *something*.

By the second act, Red has been moved to *solitary confinement*. Remember, this is a musical. At this point, Buffer may have been sensing our impending claustrophobia and need for some type of movement, and so Red is allowed a dream world where he climbs from his cell to sing a duet with his dead wife, re-enact her death from home abortion, attempt to kill the DA (who, in reality, has become sympathetic to Red's mission), hang out at a bar with his dead dock working buddies and get a fake fantasy trial. There's also an imagined song and tap dancing number with the DA that Red is not privy to, and so begs the question why we're seeing it at all.

Peripherally, the prerecorded soundtrack crackles and spits vintage orchestration so loudly that many songs and voices are obscured; and in a dire move, Buffer chose to prerecord some dock workers singing but the men on stage cannot keep with the same synching, resulting in a cacophony of words that find no common melody. The tragedy is, of course, that these are fine actors and singers; if only they'd realized that even idealistic pink boots can trip you up.

**SINGING JAILBIRDS: THE MUSICAL** THE WARNER GRAND THEATRE | 478 W SIXTH ST | SAN PEDRO 90731 | 310.929.8129 | [THERELEVANTSTAGE.COM](http://THERELEVANTSTAGE.COM) | FRI-SAT 8PM, SUN 2:30PM | \$5-20

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