

# Review: Hang on for this uplifting, energizing theatrical ride



A Nissan truck joins the actors onstage in "Hands on a Hardbody." (Steven Miller Photography)



By **Matthew J. Palm** · Contact Reporter  
The Artistic Type

JANUARY 30, 2016, 1:16 AM

**"H**ands on a Hardbody" lasted just 28 performances on Broadway. That's unfortunate because this entertaining show brings a different flavor to musical theater. With its country-pop soundtrack, plainspoken message and the type of characters not often seen on the stage, it's a breath of fresh air.

I suspect "Hands on a Hardbody" — the title refers to a pickup truck, by the way — will fare better in Winter Garden. The musical's small-town setting makes it a natural for the Garden Theatre, where it opened Friday night. And the show's rural characters aren't presented as objects of laughter; you might chuckle at the broad Texas accents at first, but you'll quickly realize these aren't simpletons to be looked down upon.

TheatreWorks Florida, producing the show for the Garden, has assembled a strong, immensely likable cast

and director Scott A. Cook has captured the right balance between the intimate and universal messages of the story by Doug Wright. Even minor sound issues on opening night couldn't mask this show's giant heart.

That's not to say it's a perfect play. It can drive into preachy territory; Wright doesn't always have faith that his show's message will shine through without verbalizing it. The singing, too, could be stronger in places — some performers sounded out of their range.

But all the actors, whether singing or speaking, are beautifully committed to their characters, and their obvious affection for them transfers to the audience.

The story is simple: A diverse group of folks in a small Texas town compete to win a truck by seeing who can keep one hand on the vehicle the longest. Through the twangy and catchy songs by Trey Anastasio of rock band Phish and Amanda Green, the audience learns of the contestants' hopes and fears. As you might expect, they are all holding on to much more than a Nissan.

The truck itself is the centerpiece of James F. Beck's pitch-perfect set. Led by music director David Foust, the orchestra is perfectly balanced.

Standouts in the large cast include Beki Herrbach and Aaron Atkinson as a scrappy, poor but principled couple; Kristoffer Cleto, who unleashes a strong singing voice as a proud American of Mexican heritage; and Gabe Friedman who doesn't overplay his character's simplicity.

Justin J. Scarlat and Michael Colavolpe, as two of the fiercest competitors, balance each other well — Scarlat a seething mass of bluster and bile, Colavolpe dignified in his determination. And Desiree Perez is magnificent. Her character's religious nature is presented with no hint of highbrow condescension, but simply and purely. When she feels the "Joy of the Lord," as her signature song is titled, the spirit is contagious.

### **'Hands on a Hardbody'**

- **What:** TheatreWorks Florida production of the Broadway musical for Garden Theatre
- **Length:** 2:35, including intermission
- **Where:** Garden Theatre, 160 W. Plant St., Winter Garden
- **When:** 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays and Monday, Feb. 8; 2 p.m. Sundays; through Feb. 21
- **Cost:** \$29-\$33 weekends; \$25-\$29 Thursdays; all tickets \$15 on Feb. 8
- **Call:** 407-877-4736

• **Online:** [Gardentheatre.org](http://Gardentheatre.org)

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