

Smokey Joe's Is Intensely Satisfying



Jukebox musicals are the theatrical equivalent of the mix tape. Sometimes, it's just a collection of songs tossed in randomly for pure enjoyment and sometimes the songs are intended to flow together and attempt a narrative, an expression of intent using the songwriter's words to convey something other than the original tune's meaning. *Mama Mia* aside, the latter approach can be spotty and a little forced in the best of circumstances. Theatre by the Sea's season opener, *Smokey Joe's Café* was never intended as anything more than a celebration of Leiber and Stoller classics, but TBTS Artistic Director Kevin Hill has attempted to frame this upbeat slice of fun into something a little more cohesive. Whether it succeeds or not is mostly irrelevant. *Smokey Joe's* is fun, performed with crisp precision and wrapped in a beautiful production package that makes this summer's opening salvo an intensely satisfying experience for those who like their musical fare fast, furious and funny.

Scenic designer Cassandra Lentz gives us a *West Side Story*-esque, cozy street scene with the titular café in the background, the orchestra (exceptionally directed by Mike Moise) hidden behind windows that serve to create a sense of space as well as allowing sound designer Charles Coes to balance performers and orchestra with studio-like clarity. Staircases and windows allow the cast to play and Hill to stage some attempts at interpersonal storylines fleshed out by the barrage of short tunes that start with "Neighborhood," probably the most cohesive concept tying everyone together beyond the ups and downs of finding a mate. That aforementioned precision extends beyond the sound design to the performances as well, with "Young Blood," which could be gritty and juvenile coming across as professionally clinical and Dance Captain Mary Claire King (who should be designated an official force of nature) overshadowing "Falling" by being almost *too* good. The plexiglass separating the orchestra from the stage becomes almost a metaphor for the entire first half of the show — instead of allowing for the imperfections that come with human contact, we are left feeling as if we're watching a filmed performance where the perfect take is all we get to experience. It's an odd feeling, that something should be too well done, but it was hard to escape that sensation until further into the performance and, by the second act, when the set is turned around and the glass removed, we are finally allowed to revel in a spectacular live event.

That is not to say that the first half doesn't have its share of showstoppers — Hill's choreography, which is stunning overall — really shines in numbers like "Searchin'" and "On Broadway" and Brittany Walters makes "Don Juan" worth the price of admission alone. Matunuck native Kendall Hope had some very vocal supporters in the house on opening night, but when she sings "I Keep Forgettin'," it's hard to deny her such irreverent praise. "D.W. Washburn" features the entire cast (who are all highly proficient at falling into chorus without losing their individuality) supporting the stupendous Kevin Curtis who gets MVP status in this show among a cast that all could make a stab at that honor at one time or

another. Curtis continuously brings talent and humor throughout the evening and, although Alana Cauthen had the audience in the palm of her hand with her solo performances of "Fools Fall in Love," which reprises in the second act in one of the attempts to keep the fragile storyline together, it is Curtis who continually pleases in number after number.

Lighting designer Bailey Costa does a beautiful slow build throughout the evening, in a carefully plotted design that starts subtly but creeps in lighting effects little by little as the show moves along. A tasteful touch of smoke allows the sultry lighting to do its work without any overt razzle dazzle and by Act Two, the stars literally explode and we are in a nighttime fantasy of love, sex, booze and abandon. With the mix between performers and orchestra sounding more natural, Act Two is much grittier and much more enjoyable as a result. By the time we reach the one-two punch of "Little Egypt" into "I'm A Woman" we get not only one of the most theatrically satisfying moments of the show, but the closest to expressing the battle of the sexes inherent throughout Hill's concept. The only oddity is the ill-advised "Jailhouse Rock," which is included simply by virtue of being one of Leiber and Stoller's most recognizable hits. The performance by Patrick Graver (who fares much better elsewhere in the show) is neutered and at a strange tempo, but we can at least enjoy yet another display of brilliant costuming by Dana Pinkston who manages to outfit every number with class, whimsy and color (the dizzying array of offstage costume changes alone must have been a show in and of themselves). Curtis has the final word with an absolutely amazing rendition of "I (Who Have Nothing)" and the songs that follow simply serve as feelgood codas to bring home the idea that these neighborhood friends share life, love and loss as they invite the audience to sing along as they engage us in the aisles.

Smokey Joe's Café is not crucial, but it's certainly fun and sets the quality bar high for the rest of Theatre by the Sea's season. The music is terrific, the dancing and performances insanely high caliber and the party never ends. Combined with a visit to the Bistro and a twilight walk of the grounds, you'll be hard-pressed to find a better June evening in RI.

Bill Hanney's Theatre by the Sea presents Smokey Joe's Café: The Songs of Leiber and Stoller through Jun 21. 364 Cards Pond Road, Matunuck. Call 401.782.8587 or visit theatrebythesea.com for more information.