Written by Mike Schulz
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About four months ago, my schedule forced me to catch the first dress rehearsal of Playcrafters' *Over the River & through the Woods* as opposed to a paid performance, and so I took some personal responsibility for my dissatisfaction with the show; a lot of what seemed to be lacking, I thought, could easily have improved by opening night. It seemed a little unfair to be critiquing a *rehearsal*. (What better place to err *than* rehearsal?)

Well, circumstances dictated that I *again* catch a Playcrafters production before its official opening – I saw the Barn Theatre's *Sweet & Hot: The Songs of Harold Arlen* at a preview on Monday, May 8 – for which I apologize. But I don't apologize *much*, because this revue already has the right spirit and a host of good feelings (and good performances) exuding from it. This didn't feel like a rehearsal; it felt like a *performance*, and a delightful one.

Granted, the show won't delight *everyone*. (Ask the gentleman in the front row who was sound asleep.) With the show's cast of 17 performing twice that many numbers from composer Harold Arlen's *oeuvre, Sweet & Hot* might frustrate those expecting, or wanting, something more than affability (like a *book*, for one thing). And it's not going to be a show for musical-comedy purists. Though the cast performs ably, and often *more* than ably, there are some glaring pitch problems, and on Monday at least, not everyone seemed committed to their harmonies; the more vocally demanding the music became, I thought, the less comfortable the cast looked, and ultimately sounded.

Yet better to shoot for the moon and to miss than to not shoot at all, and the Playcrafters ensemble and production team – led by director Tom Morrow – have aimed high and pulled off *Sweet & Hot* with sweetness, sincerity, and chutzpah. (A behind-the-scenes look at the show was published in last week's *Reader* -- " That Old Barn Magic ".") Even when the musical numbers are only half-good, the show's live band (led by musical director – and pianist/performer – Jonathan Turner) plays them beautifully, and, of course, Arlen's music would carry the day even given a lesser presentation.

What makes this production a particular treat, though, is the genuine happiness it elicits, not just in the audience, but among the cast; there were visible nerves on Monday night, and maybe

even a lack of confidence, but the singers all looked legitimately glad to be there. The show is loaded with charm, and in a revue of this sort, charm is nothing to sniff at.

It's true that several performers are lacking sharpness and polish; in addition to the occasional vocal missteps, Pamela Crouch's choreography (while not terribly demanding) proved a bit beyond some cast members' abilities. Or maybe just their recollection; a few steps and lyrics seemed not quite committed to memory. Occasionally, the effect was like watching tipsy relatives sing and dance at a wedding.

But you know something? I *like* watching my tipsy relatives sing and dance at weddings. They may not move or sound like stars, but come on … look at all the *fun* they're having! When, in *Sweet & Hot*, you watch a sextet perform "Blues in the Night," you could easily argue that the assembled voices don't have the richness or interpretive skills necessary for the heartfelt "My mama done told me" refrains, and you wouldn't be wrong. But those performing it are obviously doing so with gusto, and it's a gusto that proves positively infectious. By the end of the number, I was completely won over – it's the most unexpectedly enjoyable sequence in the show – and instances like this occurred all throughout *Sweet & Hot*; the vocals and movements may occasionally be wanting, but a jolly spirit isn't.

Fears that your favorite Harold Arlen songs will suffer via inappropriate casting choices, however, prove mostly unfounded, as *Sweet & Hot*'s ensemble is also graced with bona fide musical talents. Sheri Hess performs lovely, soulful renditions of "Stormy Weather" and "That Old Black Magic," Wendy Czekalski (in a *gor geous* dress) inflects "The Man That Got Away" with understated poignance, and Greg Golz displays a sweet, effortless higher register on "Last Night When We Were Young."

And, following the show, don't be surprised if a whole *new* roster of Arlen-composed favorites begin to take space in your head. I adored *I'm Doin' It for Defense* (with its lyrics by Johnny Mercer), which Kristin Skaggs and James Lawson perform with appropriate light-comic cheer. (Lawson is terrifically engaging when he gets to be goofy in *Sweet & Hot*, but his hesitancy in solos is noticeable; Lawson sings "Happy as the Day Is Long," but in that number at least, he doesn't quite *look* it.) And I really liked the touching pep of "Any Place I Hang My Hat Is Home," which Todd Weber pulls off with verve and confidence; a veteran of theatre in Indiana, *Sweet & Hot* marks Weber's first local production, to which I say: Welcome aboard. It's a pleasure having you with us.

If one *Sweet & Hot* performance stands above the others, though, it would be Melissa Anderson Clark's. Her musical skills are unquestionable, but what I loved most about her work here – especially when portraying Harpo Marx and *The Wizard of Oz*'s Scarecrow – was how adventurous, and even a little loopy, she was. (She's everything I'd hoped she'd be in last summer's Music Guild production of *Sugar*.) Clark is a game, vibrant performer, and she has a *great* stage face; when she smiles in *Sweet & Hot* – and, thankfully, she smiles a *lot* – Clark makes all the gloomy thoughts in your head promptly disappear. She's a breath of fresh, intoxicating air.

Beyond the considerable appeal of the performers, the technical aspects of the production are pulled off sensationally well. The sound, designed by Larry Lord, is clear and not in the least bit overpowering for the loft stage; Donna Weeks has orchestrated an intimidating – and often dazzling – set of costume changes; and the show is a triumph for lighting designer Jennifer Kingry, whose deep blues and magentas lend *Sweet & Hot* a jazz-cool blissfulness. Morrow's staging, too, is efficient and even rather graceful; the show moves at a brisk pace and never feels tedious, as revues devoted to solely one composer easily can.

(I do wish, though, that the performers' banter, added for this production, didn't include reference to forthcoming shows – including one at the Quad City Music Guild! – that we should immediately secure tickets for. I understand the appeal of this jokey sales technique to producers, but as an audience member, it pulls you out of the moment, and it always reads as cheap; it makes even a heartfelt show such as *Sweet & Hot* feel a little calculating.)

Any two-hour revue of the Arlen *ouevre* is bound to sidestep a few classics – where the hell is "Ill Wind"? – and, through their inclusion in medleys, give short shrift to others. But the *Sweet & Hot* numbers that did make the cut are strong, invigorating ones, and more than enough to enthrall fans of the composer; the sizable crowd for Monday night's presentation, who stood during the curtain call, appeared to have a blast. (The most cheering moment of my evening? Overhearing the patron behind me singing along, unprompted, to "Ac-cent-tchu-ate the Positive.") Through gumption and pluck, Playcrafters' *Sweet & Hot: The Songs of Harold Arlen* emerges as something always welcome in the arena of musical theatre – a show where you can't determine whether the audience or the *cast* is having a better time.

For tickets, call (309)762-0330. For more information, visit (http://www.playcrafters.com) .