

"Bee" Queens: Notes from Quad City Music Guild's "Beehive" Dress Rehearsal

Written by Mike Schulz

Tuesday, 20 March 2007 08:04

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As it was a technical dress rehearsal with four days to go before opening night, it was understandable that the March 19 presentation of Quad City Music Guild's *Beehive* encountered a few glitches. The scene transitions were on the poky side; it was often unclear, during the frequent medleys, whether musical numbers were supposed to end with applause or not (there were a few too many uncomfortable pauses); and the sound, during Act I especially, obviously needed polish - the over-amplification on the opening number, in particular, was *painful*.

But when all was said and done, there was only one thing sorely missing from this presentation: An audience. Because when *Beehive's* performers finally get one, this thing is gonna go through the *roof*.

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A musical revue of female artists from the 1960's, *Beehive* is a glorious, beautifully eclectic compilation of hits - everything from The Angels' "My Boyfriend's Back" to Janis Joplin's "Piece of My Heart" - and even with Monday night's attendees totaling less than twenty, Music Guild's cast sang (and acted) with gusto, and seemed to be having great fun. But I'm guessing that, once *Beehive* begins playing to the packed houses it deserves to, these performances are going to positively explode - you can feel the women onstage ready and *really* willing to connect with their audience. Based on this rehearsal, the show - often imaginatively directed by Tom Vaccaro - is in terrific shape. Now it just needs people there to *realize* that.

For instance, I can only *imagine* how crazy the Prospect Park Auditorium will be once it's filled and Jackie Madunic steps out to do her Tina Turner routine. What a performance! Madunic attacks her numbers with such enthusiasm - and with such uncanny mimicry of Turner's vocal stylings - that she's utterly irresistible; the actress' infectious joy made me laugh out loud, in sheer delight, at least half a dozen times. And when, with a devilish grin, she delivers Turner's classic "Proud Mary" intro ("We nevah... *evah... do nothin' nice* ... and *easy* ...") and launches into a spirited take on this signature song, the happiness you feel is only matched by the happiness Madunic exudes. (The fact that the actress is Caucasian doesn't matter a damn, but I wished that her back-up singers were more soulful, as the familiar "do-doot doot doot doot doot doot doot" chorus sounds, for lack of a better description, awfully *white* .) During *Beehive*'s first act, you may wonder why Madunic is used so sparingly. It turns out she's just conserving her energies.

Given less overtly flashy material, Sarah Larrabee is every bit Madunic's equal, and proves to be an inspired comedienne besides. I've been at this job for nearly two years - where has this actress *been*? Her performance of Janis Ian's "Society's Child," in its low-key way, is just as exhilarating as the Turner segment; Larrabee sings Ian's interracial-relationship heartbreaker with perfect pitch and devastating simplicity - a day after hearing it, her cadences are *still*

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haunting me. She also performs a divine rendition of "Downtown," and her Connie Francis channeling is not only vocally topnotch but *hysterical*

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Beehive

's best laugh-out-loud moment came with Larrabee's good-natured mockery of Francis' "I'm Sorry" hiccups. The actress' biography reveals that, in addition to performing with the Handel Oratorio Society for the the past five years, she has been employed by Bettendorf's Old Chicago restaurant for nearly nine. Memo to Old Chicago: If Larrabee ever asks for time off to appear in another musical,

give

it to her.

Not many performers would be able to successfully pull off Annette Funicello and Aretha Franklin in the same show, but Sarah Ulloa is not your typical performer. This 20-year-old powerhouse - sensational in St. Ambrose University's production of

The Threepenny Opera

last fall - not only sings her numbers, she fully

inhabits

them; her rendition of Franklin's "Natural Woman," in particular, is every bit the show-stopper it needs to be. Small in stature but grand in expression, Ulloa is a continual thrill to watch, and my only gripe would be that her Franklin isn't allowed to be as

physical

as I would have liked; I wished that, instead of planting her direct-center, Vaccaro had allowed her to move about the stage and really

own

it. Certainly, Ulloa seemed more than ready to.



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Being stuck dead center also seemed to hinder Sheri Hess' portrayal of Janis Joplin, who looked great in her Joplin regalia but wasn't the electric presence required. Her performances of "Piece of My Heart" and "Me & Bobby McGee" were lovely, but "lovely" and "Janis Joplin" don't exactly go hand-in-hand; being allowed to physicalize the role may have helped Hess approximate the performer's aching, gravelly soul - she was a bit too *nice* for Joplin. (While singing, Hess never loosened her grip on the microphone stand, which was a smart touch, but she didn't suggest the

reason

Joplin kept such a stranglehold on it - in all likelihood, the singer was too wasted to

stand.) In all of her other numbers, though, Hess was marvelous. She brings a radiant, effortless grace to the stage, and true warmth - Hess has a gift for making an audience feel utterly relaxed - and her vocals, especially during "The Beat Goes On," are thoroughly bewitching.

There is, in fact, an almost embarrassing amount of talent on display in *Beehive*. Casey Battern, who acts as the show's

de facto

narrator, is a perfect choice for the job; she displays wonderful audience rapport - even with Monday night's audience of less than two dozen - and knocks her musical numbers out of the park. Heather McGonigle's vocals are so pure, and so rich in emotion, that you wish she was given even more to do. (Her fabulous, moving Dusty Springfield is all we see of McGonigle in Act II.) Amy Malmstead, whose vocal phrasing and delivery is a bit modern-day for the show's period style, is nevertheless an extraordinarily exciting performer with real acting chops, and several of her renditions are to-die-for good; singing lead on the Shangri-Las' "Remember (Walking in the Sand)," Malmstead nails every bit of the song's smoky, sultry appeal. And when they're asked to, Jennifer Sondgeroth, Allison VanDeventer, and Laurel Williams fill out the ensemble nicely - true, they're given very little to do, but the more people around to look fantastic in Barb Buddin's colorful, invigorating period-wardrobe designs, the better.

In short, while I'm completely envious of those of you who'll experience *Beehive* with a large audience, this show was a thorough delight even

without

one. Vaccaro adds a lot of ingenuity to the staging; his use of iconic images - projected on a big-screen TV set - and sound bites of the '60s punctuates scenes wonderfully well. (The clips from JFK's assassination and one of Muhammad Ali's joyous, impromptu poems are especially effective.) Michael Schmidt's set design is similarly imaginative - the two piano-key staircases provide a

great

visual treat - and the production is filled with impressive flourishes that lend

Beehive

real variety; the dramatic heft of "The Beat Goes On" is marvelously unexpected, as are the

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clever, comedic pre-show announcements, delivered in voice-over by a legendary sitcom star of the '60s. (Well, not the actual, recently-deceased star *himself*, but an incredible - and incredibly funny - local facsimile.)

So prepare to have as much fun at *Beehive* as its gifted participants seem to be, and don't be surprised to find *yourself* performing - the actresses just might come into the audience and have you sing a solo chorus of "The Name Game," even though you may have *retired* from musical-theatre, and it's been 23 months since you last sang in public.

Not that, you know, that *happened* to me or anything... .

For tickets, call (309) 762-6610.