Written by Mike Schulz
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The difficulty in reviewing *Smokey's Joe's Café*, the Timber Lake Playhouse's season-closing musical, doesn't lie in knowing how to start, but when to *stop*. A plotless assemblage of '50s and '60s rock & roll hits, bluesy love songs, and novelty tunes by composers Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, this jukebox revue finds its nine-person cast performing nearly three dozen numbers, and based on their presentation here, I could make a fair case for devoting 500 words to *each* of them.

Yet it's the songs' cumulative impact that makes this *Smokey Joe's* damn near miraculous. Void of connective banter, Leiber's and Stoller's output is interrupted only by the intermission, and judging by the delirious audience response on Friday night, the crowd might have been more than content to go *without* a break; why would anyone want to spend even five minutes away from a party this exhilarating?

It takes supreme skill to make a Greatest Hits pastiche feel less like a revue than a fully formed piece of theatre, and director Chuck Smith appears to possess a rare gift for musical storytelling that doesn't require a traditional book. Blessed with an almost unerring sense of rhythm and pacing, Smith keeps the tempo lively, yet also calibrates the rare pauses during, and between, numbers for maximum impact. The silence after the "Spanish Harlem" dance break - beautifully choreographed by Brenda Didier - is held just long enough for the song's romantic longing to resonate, and the sustained breather between "Treat Me Nice" and "Hound Dog" is nearly as ticklish as the numbers *themselves,* and leads to an explosive laugh.

Given their rich material and inventive staging, it's no wonder the cast looks so happy. Two-thirds of the ensemble, though, has appeared pretty happy since early *June*. Over the past two years, Timber Lake's season closers (
Ain
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t Misbehavin
', also directed by Smith,
and 2005's
Late Nite Catechism 2
)
have featured guest artists as opposed to those in the full-time stock company, and so I didn't necessarily expect to write about Jenny Guse, Braxton Molinaro, David Lee Murray, Jr., Cassandra Marie Nuss, Zack Powell, and Jay Reynolds, Jr. again this summer. Look who's happy
now
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With her powerfully emotive singing voice and effortless stage charisma, Nuss finishes a season of stellar work in high style; her performances of "I Keep Forgettin'" and "Pearl's a Singer" are thoroughly entrancing. Guse, who delivered ravishingly pretty vocals in *Irving Berlin*'
s White Christmas
, unleashes an intoxicating, wild sexiness only previously hinted at, and in "Teach Me How to Shimmy," Powell matches her move for enthusiastic move; both actors attack their numbers, throughout the entire show, with joyous ferocity.

The prodigiously talented Reynolds sustains flawlessly pure high notes and dances with graceful abandon, while Murray - whose energetic preacher in Timber Lake's *Bat Boy the Musical* delivered a mind-blowing vocal show-stopper - traverses between the baggy-pants comedy of "D.W. Washburn" to the aching passion of "I (Who Have Nothing)" with ease. And Molinaro, though asked to hit notes that only the most
profundo
of
bassos
are capable of, has a completely winning way with deadpan comedy, and connects with his co-stars with buoyant naturalism.

Meanwhile, the only disappointment with the production's guest performers is that we didn't get

to see them all summer, too. The earthy, heartfelt vocals of RaeMon are chillingly fine - he and Nuss team up for a stunning "Love Me / Don't" duet - and Lina Kernan, whose sultry comic spirit gets a breathtaking workout, pulls off the show's most astonishing moment; at one point during her heavenly "Don Juan" solo, Kernan performs a verse positioned upside down... while doing the *splits*. As for the dynamic April Thornton, all I'll say is that not one but *two* of her numbers were interrupted by applause, and the cheers that accompanied her rendition of "Saved" constituted the most spontaneously giddy audience reaction I've heard in years.

Brilliantly performed - just wait 'til you hear the female cast members go to town on "I'm a Woman" - cleverly staged, lovingly designed... Friday night's *Smokey Joe's Café* was a pretty perfect evening of theatre, yes? Unfortunately, no, as the production's sound was oftentimes nightmarish. The onstage orchestra was sensationally good, but the body mics' popping, blaring, and - for poor Molinaro - absence was a continual annoyance; Kernan's and Thornton's mics seemed particularly untrustworthy, and for the entirety of Act I, Powell's created an odd hollowness - it sounded as though he was singing from inside a fish tank.

Bless their hearts, though, the cast's enthusiasm never waned (and Molinaro's projection helped atone for his malfunctioning mic). As season-closers go, *Smokey Joe's Café* is hugely satisfying and fantastically energetic. I can only imagine how good it'll be - fingers crossed - for audiences experiencing it
without
technical distractions.

For tickets, call (815) 244-2035.