

Written by Mike Schulz
Monday, 12 January 2009 09:51

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The current production of the musical revue *Songs for a New World* features a winning, frequently exemplary quartet and some excellent design ... and, in all honesty, I doubt I'd have enjoyed this Green Room Theatre presentation nearly as much as I did had it actually been *performed* at the Green Room Theatre.

It wasn't, of course. Following the unforeseen closing of the Rock Island venue - for reasons I don't yet have sufficient understanding or heart to get into - the co-owners of the Harrison Hilltop Theatre, a mere two days before *Songs'* opening, graciously agreed to house the production through its two performance weekends. (This was a supremely inspiring act of theatrical *quid pro quo*, as the Green Room played host to Harrison Hilltop's debuting *Proof*

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last summer, when the Davenport locale was still being renovated.) And I'm guessing that if *Songs for a New World*

- co-directed by Lora Adams and the Green Room's artistic director, Tyson Danner - had been presented as originally intended, I would've found it spirited and engaging, but little more. Given everything that's happened over the past few days, though, Friday's show turned out to be much, *much* more.

I suppose there might be a random few that attend this production with no awareness of the Green Room's recent closing, although it's a safe bet that none of them were there on opening night. (There wasn't even a murmur of surprise when, just before the performance, Danner walked onstage to announce that former Executive Director Derek Bertelsen was no longer with the company, or when Danner referenced the Green Room as now being "a theatre without a home.") But while there was no way most of us would be able to watch the organization's latest without thinking of the circumstances leading to its Harrison Hilltop presentation, I think the show worked precisely *because* of the tribulations of the past few days; the Green Room couldn't have picked a more appropriate title for this accidental "transitional" offering if they'd *tried*

Songs for a New World is a two-act revue by composer and lyricist Jason Robert Brown, first produced three years before he won a Tony Award for 1998's *Parade*, and I'm not really crazy about it - mostly because I'm *never*

really crazy about plotless stage mosaics of composers' works. Brown's fitfully complex score is mostly beautiful, and his lyrics are smart and oftentimes fantastically clever. But the songs here don't share any relationship to one another beyond their author and some vaguely identifiable themes of searching, longing, disappointment, and acceptance;

Songs for a New World

seems solely designed - as it perhaps might've been - to focus attention on an up-and-coming young talent who hadn't yet had the chance to break through.

There's absolutely nothing wrong with that, and experienced purely on a number-by-number basis, Brown's output here is admirable. Viewed as a whole, though, it's also a little confounding. An impassioned ballad set on one of Columbus' ships leads to a comical tune in which a woman threatens (mock) suicide from an apartment ledge; a touching reverie about a lost, indecisive young man leads to a brassy show-stopper wherein a pissed-off Mrs. Claus rails against her lazy-elf husband. With no context for the individual numbers via a book, a storyline, or even a thematic center, *Songs for a New World* is a show of moments, yet the moments

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don't converge in any meaningful way; Brown offers a mostly first-rate cabaret, but I'm still not entirely convinced that it's theatre. (*Songs for a New World* probably makes for an outstanding CD.)

I found it heartening, then, that so little of this mattered on Friday. Jennifer Kingry's imaginative lighting effects and Jovon Eberhart's cool, spare scenic designs were subtly magical, and all the more notable considering the unanticipated change in venue. (These technical artists pull off a beauty of a visual treat when a couple's romantic embrace forms a perfectly profiled silhouette on a neighboring flat.) And the vocal ensemble of Danner, Cara Chumbley, Steve Quartell, and Sarah Ulloa would certainly have been welcome under any circumstances, as would the expert accompaniment of pianist Danny White. But with the waves of empathetic goodwill extending from the Green Room fans, and with so many of *Songs'* songs (unintentionally) mirroring the behind-the-scenes drama - the production's first number features the lyric "Just when you're on the verge of success, the sky starts to change," and a Danner solo has him singing "Let me out of here, give me back all my dreams" - the production, now, also boasts an emotional heft it might've otherwise lacked.

The show's poignance, perhaps unsurprisingly, is most acutely felt with Danner, who returns the audience's figurative embrace with glorious confidence and a beaming smile; under trying circumstances, Danner exudes exquisite control and joy. (A few high notes are a little beyond his grasp, but it should be noted that Danner assumed the role after another actor dropped out during rehearsals. Seriously, this show has been *plagued* with hardships.) Chumbley, with her lovely soprano, radiates pure, unaffected sweetness and utter sincerity, and Quartell frequently peppers his strong vocals with sneakily ironic comedy; you register his funniest moments a lyric or two after the fact.

And Ulloa, bless her, reaffirms her status as local theatre's heir apparent to Patti LuPone. A ballsy, brassy powerhouse who knows exactly when to employ delicate restraint, she's wickedly enjoyable in the comedic "Just One Step" and "Surabaya Santa" numbers, and magnificently layered in the show's best song ("Stars & the Moon"), yet her exuberant presence and pitch-perfect dynamism never overwhelm her co-stars. Ulloa's performance in *Songs for a New World* is a wonderful reminder of the sterling work she did for the Green Room in last summer's *John & Jen*, and a hint as to the marvels the Green Room will (fingers crossed) continue to provide even as "a theatre without a home." It's a new world indeed.

Green-ish Brown: "Songs for a New World," at the Harrison Hilltop Theatre through January 18

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For more information, visit TheGreenRoomTheatre.com .