

Hoboken to Hollywood at Edgemar Center

Posted by Joel Elkins on Oct 18th, 2010



Hoboken to Hollywood (subtitled “A Journey Through the Great American Songbook”) puts you in the audience for the taping of a fictionalized television special, complete with commercials and behind-the-scenes drama. (The star of the show, a blue-eyed, fedora-wearing, hot-tempered crooner from Hoboken, is never mentioned by name, so I’ll call him “Frank.”) From the very beginning you are put in the mood, as, prior to escorting you into the “studio,” the stage manager politely asks that you turn off your transistor radios or other more sophisticated devices, as they may interfere with the taping. After the audience is seated, the action starts abruptly, without fanfare or introduction, as the director and

stage hands prepare for the beginning of the show.

The set is artfully done, complete with stage, glassed-in director’s booth, applause signs and, in a truly brilliant move, two overhead video screens which transmit live feed from the working cameras onstage, showing the theater audience what the audience at home would be seeing. Thanks to Aaron Star’s technical work and Kathi O’Donohue’s lighting, the images on the screens look amazingly realistic, particularly during Sinatra’s solos, where the lighting is appropriately low, setting the perfect tone and shadows for that 50s T.V. show feel. During the band numbers, on the other hand, the stage is flooded by light from behind, silhouetting the band members and giving the stage a washed-out feel.

However, the focus of the show is the brilliant lead performance of Luca Ellis, who with Paul Litteral and director Jeremy Aldridge, also co-wrote. Given what a tremendous and unmistakable talent Sinatra was, it would be easy for an impersonator to fall short by comparison, but Ellis more than manages to hold his own. From his singing voice and intonation to his blue eyes and not-overdone New Jersey accent, he successfully channels the man and the musician. As part of the taping, he introduces and performs, to the audience and to the cameras, many of the songs for which Sinatra was famous, accompanied by a full 12-piece band, led by bandleader Nelson Riddle (Jeff Markgraff).

In between, there are period commercials for Shmimex watches and Mustang cars, realistically voiced by announcer Chandler Hill and starring blonde bombshell Darlene (Franci Montgomery). There is also some behind-the-scene drama, between the director (Al Bernstein), Andy, the stagehand (Pat Towne) and even “Frank” himself. (As good as Ellis is at capturing Sinatra’s charisma, savoir faire and stage presence, he is not quite able to duplicate the man’s legendary temper, which, by all accounts, could cause grown men to soil themselves.) The most memorable and amusing elements of these scenes are the interactions between ultra-suave Frank and blundering, awkward Andy. (Towne’s performance is a little over-the-top for this reviewer, but Ellis’ steady and nuanced composure more than make up for it.)

Thankfully, at the heart and soul of the production are the terrific musical numbers, both realistically derivative and highly entertaining in their own right. The gimmick of interweaving the songs with a tongue-in-cheek glimpse into the taping of a TV special is extremely clever, but compromised by some substandard performances by the supporting cast. The performance I saw was a preview, so there were the expected technical miscues, such as forgotten camera changes, resulting in shots of an empty stage while action was going on elsewhere. However, I’m sure all that will be cleaned up by opening night. Ellis and his blue eyes, on the other hand, shouldn’t change a thing.