

Los Angeles Times



Culture Monster

ALL THE ARTS, ALL THE TIME

Theater Review: 'Hoboken to Hollywood' at the Edgemar

Nov. 2, 2010

It's a mass seduction. A guy saunters in, snappily attired in a single-breasted charcoal suit. Setting aside his fedora, he turns his sexily hooded eyes to the audience and, as the band strikes up, emits a dreamy baritone.

The clock speeds backward and, ring-a-ding-ding, the audience at the Edgemar in Santa Monica finds it's been returned to an era of swinging, swanning hipness.

Technicians scurry, cameramen train their lenses. Theatergoers are the studio audience for a program titled "Hoboken to Hollywood: A Journey Through the Great American Songbook." Its headliner is a crooner whose name is never mentioned but who is introduced, at one point, as the Chairman of the Board. The audience knows who he is, despite the pains taken to avoid breaching the perimeter securing this singer's carefully controlled legacy.

The show is built around Luca Ellis' remarkable vocal impersonation. But what really puts the material across is its celebration of American song, highlighting much-loved tunes by the likes of Harold Arlen and Johnny Mercer, of Jimmy Van Heusen and Sammy Cahn. That means a song list that includes "That Old Black Magic," "Call Me Irresponsible" and nearly two dozen more. Put a horn-heavy 12-member orchestra behind those tunes, as this show does, and you've got an audience tapping its toes and grinning ear to ear.

Ellis reproduces the minutest nuances of this certain singer's style. His tone is smooth if lightly sandpapered, narrowed and focused so that it sounds like a horn. He bends pitches a tad, like a jazz instrumentalist; his diction turns, at times, percussive. And then there's the phrasing, so conversational that you feel as though he's seated on the next bar stool, an arm slung 'round your shoulder. This is the voice of experience, so you listen close when, in "That's Life," he sings: "I've been up and down and over and out / And I know one thing"

The band -- arrayed along a stacked white wedding cake of a bandstand -- plays arrangements by Kendall Wallace that sound like those of such masters as Nelson Riddle and Quincy Jones.

An ongoing, supposedly comic off-camera crisis is pressed a bit too hard, and breaks for mock advertisements interrupt the smooth-cruising momentum. No matter. This show is a winner for creators Ellis and music director Paul Litteral, with a book by Ellis, Litteral and director Jeremy Aldridge -- all connected with iterations of the similar musical hit "Louis & Keely: Live at the Sahara." Applause signs flash to cue audience response, but they're entirely unneeded.

-- Daryl H. Miller

"Hoboken to Hollywood," Edgemar Center for the Arts, 2437 Main St., Santa Monica. 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, 3 p.m. Sundays. Ends Dec. 12. \$34.75. (310) 392-7327 or www.edgemarcenter.org. Running time: 2 hours, 5 minutes.

Photo: Luca Ellis as you-know-who in "Hoboken to Hollywood." Credit: James W. Thompson.

