

Theatre-Go-Round honors genius of Peter Allen

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When you attend a musical cabaret and end up moved to tears, something has either gone terribly wrong or wonderfully right.

In the case of the latest show from Jon Putzke's Theatre-Go-Round Dinner Theatre (TGR), the reason for tears was due to the magnificence of its performers and the magic of the music ? as well as the tragic story of its composer.

"Between the Moon and New York City" features the songs of Grammy and Academy Award-winning entertainer/songwriter Peter Allen. It offers a poignant musical journey performed in true New York City cabaret style.

Career cut short

Allen's music reflects not only various stops along his all-too-brief life, but also the heart and soul of the man himself. Though he died of an AIDS-related illness at age 48, his life and career were filled with a full measure of tragedies and triumphs.

His journey began with a difficult childhood in a remote Australian town and ended with international acclaim and a post-mortem musical created in his honor, "The Boy from Oz," which earned Allen's portrayal Hugh Jackman a Tony Award in 2004.

Judy, Judy, Judy

After being discovered in 1964 by Judy Garland, while performing in a trio at the Hong Kong Hilton, Allen subsequently became Garland's opening act.

She became his manager and later mother-in-law when he married her daughter Liza Minnelli. But Allen was on a path to self-realization and creativity, and subsequently came out as gay.

Before the marriage ended and following Garland's death, Allen composed a heart-wrenchingly beautiful homage to Garland in "Quiet Please, There's a Lady on Stage."

Top tunes

Some of his other beloved songs include "Arthur's Theme" from the movie starring Dudley Moore; "I Honestly Love You" sung by fellow Aussie Olivia Newton-John and "Don't Cry Out Loud," sung by Melissa Manchester, which made it to the top of the charts with lyrics that referenced aspects of Allen's own life.

He played to sold-out audiences at Radio City Music Hall and other venues, worldwide.

New format

Putzke's show ? built entirely around Allen's music ? is a movingly fitting tribute.

Departing from his usual format of utilizing the multi-talents of several cast members, Putzke created the production to headline the triple-threat talent of cast regular Beth McKenzie-Shestak, ably supported by dinner theater musical director Gregory Harris and cast newcomer Brendan Wenger.

The production took a year to conceive and create, according to Putzke, and was designed to feature Allen's musical genius through McKenzie-Shestak's impressive vocal skills.

It also bring a new concept of performance to local audiences: it evokes Manhattan's supper clubs, such as the Carlyle Cafe.

McKenzie-Shestak could indeed headline at the Carlyle Cafe. She is just that good, with looks to match.

Known locally as a TGR cast regular, she is also a formidable stage presence as a dance instructor partner during the annual Dancing with Vero's Stars competition.

McKenzie-Shestak earned a degree in fine arts in musical theater at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia and is a veteran performer with New York City credits.

She delivers a stunning and elegantly performed show.

New look

"This is a whole new style, a whole new presentational format and definitely a whole new look. We're presenting a very intimate cabaret-style show," Putzke said.

His goal was to offer something different and he hoped audiences ? as well as his performers ? would embrace a "change of pace."

Building a show around one composer was a challenge, Putzke said, made more so by the decision of using a female lead singer to showcase songs written and performed by a man.

Allen's writing style didn't follow the usual compositional formulas of a melody, repetitive chorus and another verse of themed melody.

Putzke said Allen might start with a melodic tune and "then go off on a tangent so he could get all of his feelings and emotions into his music. It isn't structured. Just like his life.

"He had his dreams but he was also someone who could not walk all over anyone to make it happen. He was always for the underdog.

"His life story intrigued me. It was so obvious that his songwriting was telling the story of his life as he went through it."

It's a life worth hearing.

"Between the Moon and New York City" will be performed on Sundays Oct. 18 and 25; Nov. 1, 8, 15 and 22 at the Theatre-Go-Round Dinner Theatre, located at the Quilted Giraffe Restaurant, 500 U.S. Hwy. 1, Vero Beach.

Doors open for dinner at 4:30 p.m. followed by the show at 6. The all-inclusive dinner theater package is \$55 per person and reservations are required. Call 772-252-9341.