

High-energy ride down lazy ol' river returns

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If ever there were a Theatre-Go-Round (TGR) Dinner Theatre musical revue that was a smash hit among audiences it was “Riverboats and Ragtime” (R&R) - a musical excursion down the mighty Mississippi. Making its debut in the spring of 2010, R&R proved to be a wildly popular show featuring minstrel, ragtime, gospel and Americana tunes that ran an unprecedented 10 months. Audiences simply could not get enough of it.

While it seemed at the time that the musical cruise down “Ol’ Man River” was a one-way journey, R&R is making a return engagement through May 7 at TGR’s home at Vero Beach’s Quilted Giraffe Restaurant. Dinner theatre artistic director Jon Putzke has edited the original two-act revue into a tighter format featuring upbeat and rhythmic selections made famous years ago by vaudeville shows and pop music.

When asked why he decided to reprise an updated version of R&R, Putzke’s enthusiasm was hardly contained.

“Oh, my God! I’m coming from the standpoint that it was such a hit the first time. There are so many songs people know but maybe haven’t heard for about a hundred years and it’s fun to hear such a medley of them,” Putzke said.

This show also features a bit of characterization for each cast member that Putzke said they “play” throughout the revue.

“It’s a little more like a mini musical traveling down the river than a story of steamboats, paddle boats, riverboats and ragtime music. The cast is having a ball with it,” Putzke said.

Opening recently to a completely sold out audience, R&R features veteran cast members Gregory and Caitlin Harris and Beth McKenzie-Shestak plus relative newcomer Brendan Wenger. They sported themed and colorful costumes by Marg Putzke that wonderfully evoke slick riverboat gamblers and their sassily sultry saloon girls.

Gregory Harris, a Vero Beach High School music teacher who serves as TGR vocal director, is married to Caitlin and their pairing onstage is as appealing as their real-life match-up.

McKenzie-Shestak is a vocal powerhouse who also choreographs each TGR show.

She has been a professional dance instructor for the popular “Dancing with Vero’s Stars” annual fund-raising competition and has graced many professional stages as a singer-dancer who simply wows audiences with her beauty and performing talent.

Wenger – the most recent and youngest member of the cast – assumes his role like the trouper he is and if his other fellow cast mates are reprising previously performed songs from the initial run of R&R, then Wenger has been a quick study and fits right into the mix, solidifying a quartet of able performers.

This show is fast-paced and just plain fun. On opening night, many in the audience felt compelled to sing along to songs they’ve known forever. And that feel-good familiarity and all-encompassing warmth from the performers to the audience is, perhaps, one of the primary reasons TGR has enjoyed such overwhelming success as it approaches its 10th anniversary of presenting dinner theatre in Vero Beach.

A great meal – courtesy of the Quilted Giraffe’s Chef Kurt Runge – is a certainty. And to that culinary delight add Putzke’s life-long expertise in the performing arts. His ability to build entire shows around various themes or particular iconic artists (like Judy Garland, Peter Allen and more) is practically legendary. Putzke culls hits and little-known songs into a comprehensive musical experience that showcases the depth and breadth of the chosen theme or artist.

R&R opens with all the excitement once felt along “Old Muddy” when a show boat paddling down the river docked at towns along the way. “Here Comes the Show Boat” is a rousing number that sets the stage for a medley of river-themed songs.

Floating theatres were memorialized in the late 1920s in a book by Edna Ferber entitled “Show Boat.” That era of riverboat gambling and entertainment was relatively short-lived from the 1880s to the 1920s but although changing times and tastes ended such fun on the Mississippi, Putzke rekindles an era of pure Americana with this show.

As a prelude to “Good Old Vaudeville Show” we learn that at the turn of the last century in America there were about 25,000 vaudeville performers thrilling audiences in often far-flung places with live performances and songs including “Hello My Baby,” “When You Wore a Tulip,” “Oh Suzanna” and more. And if the lyrics to those songs and others like “Wait ‘Til the Sun Shines Nellie” seem slightly hokey to 2017-era ears, then it is nonetheless in the most charming of ways.

No doubt life in those earlier times was no less challenging than now, but somehow there was an aura of homey wholesomeness in those songs that is missing in today’s popular music. Thanks to Putzke and his cast, we are able – albeit briefly – to return to kinder, gentler times musically speaking.

Stops along the Mississippi literally and musically included St. Louis (“St. Louis Blues”) and culminated in the “big Easy” of New Orleans with “Jambalaya,” “Blue Bayou” and

“Mr. Bojangles” which was heartwarming performed by Wenger who also soloed brilliantly on “Ol’ Man River.”

A lesser-known song by Bing Crosby (“Lullaby in Ragtime”) shortly segued into a rousing river beat medley that included the iconic “Proud Mary” which became a hit by various artists. But it is without question that Tina Turner – along with Ike Turner and her back-up singer/dancer Ikettes – performed the most spectacular version both audibly and visually.

Channeling their own inner Tina Turners, the TGR cast literally nailed “Proud Mary” complete with authentic choreographed moves. Tina Turner would be proud.

The return of R&R is a show not to be missed. It performs Sundays through May 7 except for Easter Sunday on April 16 at the Quilted Giraffe Restaurant located at 500 South U.S. 1 in Vero Beach. Dinner service begins at 4:30 p.m. with the show at 6 p.m.

The cost is \$55 per person and includes a three-course dinner, show ticket, tax and gratuity. Reservations are required and may be made by calling the dinner theatre box office at 772-252-9341 or by visiting online at www.theatregorounddinnertheatre.com.