

Review: Real treasure of 'Cole' lies in the music

By T.D. Mobley-Martinez (Contact)

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TheatreZone, Naples' only Equity professional theater company, kicks off its first full season with "Cole," which plays through Sunday on the tiny stage of the Community School of Naples.

As founding director Mark Danni reminds a nearly sold-out opening night audience: The company prides itself in resurrecting the "lost treasures of Broadway."

A worthy mission, but one that sets the bar rather high. And "Cole," a stripped-down ride through composer Cole Porter's life, falls somewhere short of a treasure of musical theater.

First, it's really revue, not a singing biography. Nobody's acting out the riding accident that crushed his legs and stranded him in a life of pain. And no one is recreating his madcap life in Paris, on the beaches of Entebbe or his waffling between his commitment to wife Linda Lee and his pursuit of other men (Porter's liaisons are sidestepped in "Cole").

And that's fine, I suppose. Bio pics like the revisionist "Night and Day" with Cary Grant and more recently, "De-Lovely" have proven that Porter's a tough nut to crack, narratively speaking. Strangely so for a man with such talent, such tragedy and such a conflicted life.

Still, there are the clever, funny, romantic songs — treasures that comprise several chapters in the American Songbook. Tunes like "I Get a Kick Out of You" and "Let's Misbehave" are enough to sustain anyone through anything, including a little musical frippery.

"Cole" opens with Porter's last song, "Wouldn't It Be Fun," which (perhaps autobiographically, the cast suggests) mulls the benefits of not being a VIP. It's kicked off by Nancy Dussault, who, despite a Tony-winning career on Broadway, many will probably recognize from her continuing role on TV's "Too Close For Comfort."

In the remaining two hours, the cast of seven energetic actors take turns singing and dancing, pouting, nuzzling and narrating the milestones of Porter's life in short, direct address monologues.

Born in little Peru, Ind., in 1891. A stint at Yale, then Harvard. His first Broadway show (and first flop), "See America First," in 1916. His trip to Paris.

Which leads to the first ahhhhh moment of the evening. A glittering Dussault, in the first of many fetching gowns, rolls into "I Love Paris." (In fact, Kathleen Kolacz's many costumes hit a perfect note of restrained glamour throughout.) Drawn from the

penultimate musical in Porter's career, 1953's "Can-Can," it's a tune that reminds you of the simple, driving logic of love — whatever the object.

With 17 songs in the first act alone, not every one is as well-oiled or resonant. Besides being a remnant of turn-of-the-century boosterism, "See America First" is an odd contradiction for a composer who, the cast reminds us, had seen little of America. "I Happen to Like New York" is a monotone and repetitive. "I Worship You" a Hallmark card to at-arms-length love.

It leaves you yearning, at times, for "Let's Do it," "You're the Top" and other gems not included in the show.

On the other hand, Jim Corsica's rendition of "I'm a Gigolo," is downright charming and quite funny. As a gigolo who "gets stocks and bonds/ from faded blondes/ every 25th of December" and pushes "ladies/ with lifted faces/ across the floor," the aging actor may lean into the contradiction of a balding man with ample proportions as gold digger, but he doesn't lampoon the song itself. Indeed, Corsica is consistently one of the strongest performers in the show.

Like Corsica, when Meg Pryor is on the stage, your eyes go her way. Her ability to meld a little jaded smokiness with her eminently belttable voice gives you a chill on the dark "Love For Sale." In ensemble numbers like "Most Gentlemen Don't Like Love" or "What Is This Thing Called Love," she telegraphs a kind of presence people used to call star power.

Dussault, though, is the one to watch in "Cole." Like the rest of the cast, she had some fumbles in monologues and timing on opening night. Still, she radiates an ease on stage, with the audience and with the material that emerges from years working her craft. Her greatest gift is the simplest but most important: She listens to her fellow actors. In that, her focus and comfort with stillness, she draws you into the reality of the moment — heightened though it may be.

Act One ends with a dramatic piece of stagecraft: The up-tempo "Tomorrow" ("ain't going to be no sorrow tomorrow") stops mid-tune and the cast describes Porter's life-altering riding accident. Then the song resumes, a shadow cast on a message that once seems so naive.

Act Two: More songs, Porter's biography (his move to Hollywood, the long dry spell between hits) taking a backseat for tunes like "It's De-Lovely," "What Is This Thing Called Love" and "Let's Misbehave."

"Cole" ends in a sort of Fosse-esque starkness. Solitary singers on a darkish stage telling a story through Porter's lyrics. "Every Time We Say Goodbye" never sounded so poignant and beautifully sad.