

Review: Who could ask for more at the Copa?

By CHRIS SILK

Tuesday, December 9, 2008

NAPLES — Meg Pryor hits the G&L Theatre stage midway through the second half of TheatreZone's "Copacabana" wearing a head full of fruit that puts Carmen Miranda to shame, and merengues off with the parts of the show she hasn't already stolen.

Her spirited Cuban showgirl proves the final ingredient to lift the heretofore pleasing but somewhat pedestrian adaptation of Barry Manilow's hit song from simple fun to flat-out fabulous. The show's just a blast to watch — even if its got about as much substance as a feather boa an a handful of sequins.

"Copacabana" started life, of course, as a song about a showgirl named Lola, who sings at the Copacabana, the hottest club north of Havana. Lola likes bartender Tony, but bad guy Rico tries to steal her away, "and then the punches flew." The musical, created by Manilow and collaborators Bruce Sussman and Jack Feldman, frames the song within the imagination of struggling tunesmith Stephan, with Lola the girl of his dreams and the events inspiration for his lyrics.

That's a flimsy plot for a musical but, really, all anyone wanted was an excuse to put on costumes, sing, cha-cha, tap and dance. "Copacabana" never made it to Broadway, but did spend two years on London's West End in the mid 1990s and served time as an Atlantic City stage show. Barry Manilow himself starred in the 1985 TV movie from which all other versions sprung.

There's much to love about director Mark Danni's creation — starting of course with Pryor. The "Ay Caramba" number, done to a steamy salsa beat, is worth the price of admission alone. She also manages to convey — with just a few lines and hurt looks — the depth of pain that must exist in the relationship between her Conchita and villainous Tropicana club owner Rico Castelli (an appropriately sleazy David Goguen, who has way too much fun with the part).

Kathleen Kolacz's Vegas-come-to-Livingston Road showgirl costumes run a very close second when it comes to praiseworthiness. The 1940s-set show really demanded something flashy and spectacular and she delivered in spades. In particular, look for a set of Copa Girl costumes that would seem to pay homage to the Statue of Liberty, as well as a stunning purple ensemble incorporating peacock feathers into gigantic headpieces.

The show's leads — Broadway vet Larry Alexander (Tony/Stephen) and Katie Barton (Lola La Mar) — turned in solid performances. Alexander certainly seems comfortable as a show's leading man and has the "aw-shucks" charm necessary to give his character an air of believability. He's also got the moves — just wait for the "Dancing Fool" number — a real crowd-pleaser. Barton has a great set of pipes on her; the "Just Arrived" number is an immediate signal of her talent, even as she fights the on-stage orchestra to make herself heard.

Both Barton and Alexander are constrained somewhat by the limits of the show itself, including natural lulls that draw attention to the virtual absence of a real storyline. There's so much work for members of the ensemble that the leads feel merely the first among equals, victims of the prosaic writing. The show really only feels alive when there's singing and dancing and there's no way around that. On the plus side, there's a whole lot of singing and dancing and enough feathers and sequins to cover the gaps in between.

Karen Molnar's choreography is inventive (if not executed with pinpoint precision), especially with the huge number of routines asked of her; she also doubles as a Copa Girl. One problem that rears its head repeatedly at the G&L Theatre during the troupe's musicals is that actors simply run out of stage — imperceptibly stumbling over each other, props or in the case of Thursday's debut, the raised section of the stage.

It certainly isn't a deal breaker, but is noticeable. I'd love to see what Molnar could do with a full-size stage and a dozen or more chorus girls.

The best word to describe the show is fun. It is easy on the eyes, light on the ears and most definitely the brain. There are showgirls, everybody knows how to act, everybody knows how to dance and Meg Pryor knocks your socks off after intermission.

*I'd like to go some place where music and passion were always the fashion. Suggestions?
Email me at csilk@naplesnews.com*

IF YOU GO

"Copacabana"

- What: Adaptation of Barry Manilow's hit song
- When: 8 p.m. Dec. 6, 10, 11, 12, 13 and 2 p.m. Dec. 7 and 14.
- Where: G&L Theatre on the campus of Community School of Naples, 13275 Livingston Road, Naples
- Cost: \$35-\$40
- Information: 888-966-3352 or theatrezone-florida.com

If you need inspiration

<http://www.lyricsdepot.com/barry-manilow/copacabana.html>

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