

Manilow's 'Copacabana' hits G&L Theatre stage

BY AMY SOWDER • ASOWDER@NEWS-PRESS.COM • DECEMBER 3, 2008

Audiences at this weekend's "Copacabana" musical in Naples will discover how Barry Manilow and Oscar Wilde think alike.

"Life imitates art far more than art imitates life," playwright, poet and short story writer Wilde once said.

Barry Manilow wrote the 1978 song "Copacabana" about a guy writing a song.

His character dreamed the song would become a smash hit.

That year Manilow's disco ditty crested at No. 8 on the Billboard charts and at No. 42 in the United Kingdom. He got a Grammy.

And "Copacabana" keeps shapeshifting.

Manilow made it into a made-for-TV musical film and a one-hour Las Vegas show. He expanded it into a stage musical in England and later it jumped the pond back to the United States.

When the song became 15 years old, a remix version reached No. 22 on the Billboard charts.

Most people have heard of the song but aren't acquainted with the musical's more intricate plot, says Broadway performer Larry Alexander.

"It might be the first musical that was based on a song, and I'm a pretty big musical theater freak," he says.

In the musical, Alexander plays the songwriter, Stephen.

Stephen writes about Lola, a showgirl at Copacabana, a night club based on a real New York City hot spot during the 1940s.

Lola's boyfriend is the club's bartender, Tony.

"As he writes it, the characters come alive," says Alexander, whose Stephen becomes Tony. "At the end of the story, it's unclear whether it's still fantasy or reality."

It's also apropos that Katie Barton plays Lola.

Like Lola, she's a young woman who recently moved to New York City to make it big in show biz.

"I can definitely relate," Barton says.

But enter the dangerous Rico character.

Rico spots Lola in a performance, gets her drunk on champagne and drugs her drink.

He kidnaps her and takes her to become his woman and his main showgirl in his own club, the Tropicana in Havana.

"That's where my imagination comes in," Barton says, laughing.

So Tony and the Copacabana club owner come to Havana to rescue her.

A fight ensues. A gun fires. And someone dies.

The musical is packed with elaborate, high-energy songs and dances.

Bright, feathery and sequined headdresses adorn the showgirls in Vegas fashion.

Critics have dubbed Manilow's work as cheesy, but many musicians and cabaret performers respect his craftsmanship as a songwriter, Alexander and TheatreZone director Mark Danni say.

"I like to have something in my season that's light and fun, something in which you can sit back and smile," Danni says. "It's certainly not cerebral, nor is it trying to be."

In typical TheatreZone fashion, Danni and the professional New York City cast are putting the show together in a whirlwind eight days.

TheatreZone is Naples' only professional equity theater company.