

Review: Run to get tickets for **LEADER OF THE PACK**

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So, it's close to the end of a two-hour presentation of songs from the sixties. On stage, a woman clutches a rag doll and belts out "River Deep Mountain High."

Is Tina Turner reprising one of her biggest hits in a stadium packed with rabid rockers? Not exactly. Part-time local Karen Gray Cipriani is about the same vintage as the diva from Nutbush, Tenn., but she's blonder, a little less frenetic in the dance moves and a tad more Rubenesque. Her venue is the G & L Theatre at the Community School, and the audience she's charming is a full house of lucky Neapolitans who turned up Thursday night to see TheatreZone's production of **LEADER OF THE PACK**.

Director Mark Danni and his crew got it all right on the opening night of a five-show run that ends Sunday afternoon. No glitches, no flubs, no missteps in a performance that sparkled every bit as brightly as the sequins on the second-act costumes.

In his quest to spotlight some of Broadway's lost treasures, Danni unearthed a play presented on Broadway in 1984 that showcases the music of Ellie Greenwich. This prolific – and still with us – musician and her collaborators were responsible for some of the most popular songs blasting from car radios in the days when Ford Fairlanes and Thunderbirds cruised small town main streets, when the Platters really were original, and when a girl group called the Secrets had a lead singer named Cipriani and a big hit called "The Boy Next Door."

Hers is the voice of authenticity that leads the audience back to the time when Greenwich got started in the music business, slaving over a hot piano in the Brill Building, that greenhouse of musical creativity

that simultaneously nurtured the likes of Stoller and Lieber and Carole King.

LEADER OF THE PACK cobbles a wisp of a book to an amazing menu of hits. Not too much talk. Plenty of songs. But how to deliver them without being tedious?

Danni and his professional company found the way.

Start with a powerhouse cast. In addition to the winsome Cipriani as the narrating "girl who was there," the show benefits from the multitalented Kim Morgan Dean as Ellie. Dean's got an easy way about her on stage, confident when she's standing up to her boss, cool when she's playing musical trivia with her writing partner, best when she's slamming the seats with her take-no-prisoners voice.

Her two back-up pals don't have to take a back seat to anyone, either. Both Kristen Licata and Courtney Whittamore show off their own formidable pipes in crowd-pleasing solos.

Luke Tudball and David Goguen give high caliber performances as the partner and boss, respectively.

Next, mix in some snappy dancing. Choreographer Karen Molnar, who also performs deliciously as a doo-wop girl, has this whole cast twisting, stomping, and kicking like American Bandstand teenagers, which, truth be told, most are not.

Toss in hilarious costumes close to the hearts of those in the house who remember their own poodle skirts and pedal pushers. The big-hair wigs were a show in themselves.

Add strong support from the six-man orchestra under the direction of pianist/conductor Charles Fornara, who gave Steven Matthews on sax and David Stevens on trumpet some magical musical moments.

Then ace it with good direction. Clever segues, fast pace, smart staging, high energy, excellent preparation.

The show's drama might have unintentionally increased during the evening for those in the audience who wondered if the original Secret had the stamina to make it to the finale with her younger colleagues. What immense satisfaction when she sang and hoofed it with the whippersnappers to the end, and then some.

Can't imagine anyone not having fun at this show, unless they hate the music of the era. All others run, don't stroll, to the box office.