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Theatre Review: 'Smokey Joe's Café -The Songs of Lieber and Stoller' at Gateway Playhouse

BY KIRSTEN WEYER

Take a trip to a bygone era with Smokey Joe's Café- The Songs of Lieber and Stoller, featuring The Coasters, now playing at the Gateway Playhouse. From the moment you step into the theater the bright scenic design by Steve Paladie catches your eye. Indicative of the Lawrence Welk style variety show of the past, the large geometric set pieces turn and move with multi-hued lighting to support each scene. As the show begins, the original direction and choreography of Chet Walker is immediately apparent. Costumes both amusing and dazzling were designed by Martin T. Lopez, and add a flair to the show with a recurring theme of mismatched black and gold.

Smokey Joe's Café- The Songs of Lieber and Stoller is a tribute to the musical genius of the 1950s and '60s composers Jerry Lieber and Mike Stoller. Together they wrote many chart topping hits which were sung by artists such as The Drifters and Elvis Presley, including "Hound Dog", and "Jailhouse Rock." Over twenty of their songs were recorded by The Coasters, whose participation in this production makes for an extra special performance. Both The Coasters and Lieber and Stoller were inducted into the Rock 'n Roll Hall of Fame in 1987.

Boasting outstanding vocalists and musicians, Smokey Joe's Café does the music of Lieber and Stoller proud. The band is in full view of the audience on raised platforms at the back of the stage. Their continuous stream of music including minor solos is impressive. They are comprised of conductor/keys David Truskinoff, Todd Olson on keys, Charles Leech on bass, Ray Sabatello on guitar, Jeff Potter on drums, and Mark Gatz on saxophone.

As is intended, the voices steal the show. From peppy powerhouses to smooth and sultry this cast does it all. Brilliant four part harmonies are performed in the classic style, snapping fingers included, by Nik Alexzander, Malcolm Armwood, Robert H. Fowler, and Jody Reynard. Fowler's baritone and Reynard's smooth tenor blend beautifully together on more than one occasion, while Armwood's rich and clear voice takes the lead on many songs. Seth Danner's dancing hips, winning smile and marvelous voice serve him well in "Jailhouse Rock" and all of his performances. Powerhouse performers Yvette Monique Clark, and Kathleen McCann bring down the house on more than one occasion, but also impress with their diversity in softer, smoother pieces. Both Erin McGrath and Marla McReynolds perform with grace, style and wit. Their communicative facial expressions and body movements, combined with spectacular vocals make for memorable performances throughout the show. The only thing marring an otherwise perfect performance was the unbalanced sound system. This caused multiple moments of unpleasantness. Notes that would have been flawless sounded sharp and shrill, while at other points the melody almost disappeared under the weight of numerous voices. Perhaps the biggest surprise of the night however, was Nik Alexzander. He defies initial expectations possessing a powerful voice with incredible range and control, as well as the best facial expressions of the evening.

With toe-tapping beats and familiar lyrics, Smokey Joe's Café- The Songs of Lieber and Stoller transports you back in time if only for a while. Go ahead, try and resist singing along if you can.

Read the original article at: <http://nytheatreguide.com/2014/06/theatre-review-smokey-joes-cafe-the-songs-of-leiber-and-stoller-at-gateway-playhouse/>

Newsday - June 18, 2014

'Smokey Joe's Cafe' review: Coasters rock at Gateway

BY STEVE PARKS

"She smiled at me, my heart went boom

And everybody in the room at Smokey Joe's Café

They said, 'Man be careful, that girl belongs to Smokey Joe.'"

-- Jerry Leiber/Mike Stoller

The title song isn't as well known as 40 others in the salute to early-rock songwriting superstars Leiber and Stoller. All of us, of a certain age, recall what we were doing and with whom when we heard Elvis crooning "Fools Fall in Love" or The Searchers bopping to "Love Potion #9" or The Coasters harmonizing to "Stand By Me."

It was a rite of passage to steam up car windows to the urgency of "Lovin' You."

What better way to relive those moments than with -- if not the originals -- one-off inheritors of that legacy. The Gateway opens a national revival tour of "Smokey Joe's Cafe" with a cast anchored by The Coasters, harmonizers who either sang with members of the original foursome or the son of its lead singer.

Add to that the directing/choreographing chops of Tony nominee Chet Walker and you have a formula for a rollicking musical revue that knows what it's about -- good times back in the neighborhood. So says the song, reprised throughout by The Coasters and a supporting cast that steals the show from the sometimes perfunctory quartet.

Dennis Anderson, Joe Lance Williams, Primo Candelaria and Eddie Whitfield are the second-generation Coasters who represent the tuxedo-clad old school of doo-wop harmonies. "Searchin'" is syncopated to a finger-snapping beat just as we pictured in our heads over the dashboard radio.

But this 50-years-and-counting repertoire requires a fresh approach. Enter Yvette Clark, Kathleen McCann and, in an astonishing solo surprise, Nik Alexzander, who lurks behind several comic numbers before emerging with an apoplectic emo rendition of "I (Who Have Nothing)." Clark jolts us on such belt-'em-out riots as "Hound Dog," one of many Elvis numbers that sound nothing like him (only Seth Danner's "Jailhouse Rock" approximates Presley), while McCann delivers a Janis Joplin precursor in "Pearl's a Singer."

Robert Fowler's growling bass and Malcolm Armwood's sweet tenor cover the male octave range, while Marla McReynolds' torchy ballet presence adds a touch of class, embroidered by the song and (especially) dance of Erin McGrath and Jody Reynard. Steve Paladie's jukebox set, Martin Lopez's glittery costumes and David Truskinoff's

rock band keep the joint jumping.

Read the original article (login required) at: <http://long-island.newsday.com/things-to-do/theater/smokey-joe-s-cafe-review-coasters-rock-at-gateway-1.8477718>

Dan's Papers - June 18, 2014

Smokey Joe's Café Rocks Gateway Playhouse

BY GENEVIEVE HORSBURGH

Music is a universal language that connects us all, and that is proven true with Smokey Joe's Café, the second show in Gateway Playhouse's summer season. From start to finish, this rock n' roll musical revue is captivating, stunning and roaring fun. If you love music, you will love Gateway's production of Smokey Joe's Café.

The show itself is a tribute to legendary songwriters Mike Leiber and Jerry Stoller, who were known for their storytelling through songs. Their lyrics are full of sarcasm, humor and emotion. The rhythms are catchy and familiar, with songs made famous by the likes of Elvis Presley.

The cast is made up of nine extraordinarily talented performers, joined by Rock n' Roll Hall of Fame stars, The Coasters, which makes the show even more amazing. Rock legends performing tunes that made them famous decades ago, right on the stage in Bellport, singing their hearts out—priceless.

Smokey Joe's Café is a musical revue, so there is no plot or storyline to follow; the company goes through each number seamlessly. I felt a connection with the cast from the start, a palpable energy that radiated from their voices and their movements. These are vocalists who love their craft, and that kind of passion catches you and makes you sit up straighter and listen more intently. It's so much fun watching and listening to a perfectly connected cast—it's the kind of performance you wish would never end.

Although the entire cast was phenomenal, there were a few that really stood out to me. I'm a sucker for a man who can sing, and the voice that came out of Robert H. Fowler was like warm honey. He has a deep baritone that I couldn't get enough of, and it's showcased in "Stay A While" and in "You're the Boss"—a duet with the lovely and talented Marla McReynolds. I loved her sultry routine "Don Juan," which was smoky, sexy and irresistibly funny.

I was blown away by the voice of Nik Alexzander. He may be small in stature, but there's nothing small about his voice or his stage presence. In his solo "I (Who Have Nothing)" he blew the audience away and received a standing ovation at the end of his performance. His emotional connection to the song translated loud and clear, drawing me fully into his rock star performance.

Yvette Monique Clark has one of those powerhouse voices that can blast the roof off a theater. She gave me goose bumps during "Fools Fall in Love" and made me laugh out loud during "Hound Dog." In "Saved," the number that takes us to intermission, she is joined by the whole company and together they pull off an extraordinary routine, with so much energy it was difficult not to sing along. I was tapping my foot and clapping along with the cast as they sailed through this number, looking like they were having the time of their lives.

When the women join forces and sing “I’m a Woman” it’s electrifying! Kate McCann has some set of pipes, she hit a few notes that went to the heavens and left my mouth hanging open.

The number “Teach Me to Shimmy” was such fun, and showcased the talents of Seth Danner and Erin McGrath, both amazing singers and, yes, they certainly know how to shimmy.

I enjoyed the routines where all the men sing and dance together—my favorite one was “Broadway,” although “There Goes My Baby” and “Love Potion No. 9” were incredibly fun and entertaining, too.

The addition of The Coasters to Smokey Joe’s Café made the show that much more exciting. They bring soul and flavor to an already exceptional cast. From the band to the costumes and, of course, the performers themselves, this is another Gateway hit that I’ll be talking about for a while.

Read the original article at: <http://danspapers.com/2014/06/smokey-joes-cafe-rocks-gateway-playhouse/>

BroadwayWorld.com - June 18, 2014

BWW Reviews: Gateway Presents SMOKEY JOE'S CAFE - Rock And Roll in Bellport

BY MELISSA GIORDANO

If you want a high-energy show, Smokey Joe's Café is definitely for you. The musical revue, on Broadway from 1995-2000, highlights the music of songwriting team Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller. The spectacle has forty of their hit songs done back to back including "Love Potion Number 9", "Yakity Yak", "Stand By Me" and "Jailhouse Rock". Believe me when I say that you will be dancing in your seat at some point.

Tony Award nominee Chet Walker superbly directs and Choreographs Gateway Theatre's incarnation running through June 28th at their beautiful Bellport venue.

First and foremost, a special treat for audiences is legendary R&B/Rock group The Coasters are featured in this production. The Rock and Roll Hall of Famers appear several times throughout the production to take on a handful of the show's numbers. The Coasters were instrumental in ushering in the Rock and Roll era and even though the members have changed, you can tell they are having a great time in the show and truly appreciate the enthusiastic response.

The Coasters include Dennis Anderson, Primo Candelaria, Eddie Whitfield, and Joe Lance Williams. Rounding out the rest of the stellar cast is Nik Alexander, Malcolm Armwood, Yvette Clark, Seth Danner, Robert Fowler (Broadway: The Producers, Beauty and the Beast, et. al.) Kathleen McCann, Erin McGrath, Marla McReynolds (Broadway: The Color Purple, Chicago), and Jody Reynard (Broadway: Legally Blond, Taboo, et. al.). Not only is everyone extremely talented, the company is absolutely gorgeous and made the show very sexy.

Another highlight is the incredible band that's on stage with the cast. Leading them is Musical Director David Truskinoff (Broadway: Rent, Hair 2011 Revival, End of the Rainbow). The band is comprised of Todd Olson, Charles Leech, Jeff Potter, Ray Sabatello, and Mark Gatz. It seems safe to say that they are having as much fun as the cast is. Additionally, Steve Paladie's set was fun and colorful. Large, movable structures beam lights of several colors giving the stage a funky look. This is enhanced by everyone looking beautiful in Martin T. Lopez's costumes.

And so, Gateway certainly has another hit on their hands with this incarnation of Smokey Joe's Café. Is this production consistently produced? Sure. However, when you have a Broadway caliber cast, wonderful director, and an amazing band, you simply have to indulge.

Read the original article at: <http://www.broadwayworld.com/long-island/article/BWW-Reviews-Rock-And-Roll-in-Bellport-Gateway-Presents-Smokey-Joes-Cafe-20140618#.U6IQHZRdX8I>

TheaterMania.com - June 19, 2014

Smokey Joe's Café: Chet Walker directs and choreographs the celebration of Leiber & Stoller with a little help from The Coasters.

BY IRIS WEINER

For the most part, Smokey Joe's Café is nothing new — and that's exactly what people love about it. A tribute to songwriters Mike Leiber and Jerry Stoller, the musical is an ode to rock 'n' roll standards of the late '50s and early '60s, offering audiences a delightful throwback with modern theatrical accoutrements. Despite its old but beloved material, the current incarnation at Long Island's Gateway Playhouse is unique in its originality and its stars. Its talented and charismatic cast and creative team make for a distinctive experience as the show enters its 20th anniversary national tour.

Smokey Joe's Café has the distinction of being the longest-running musical revue on Broadway, and it loses little appeal in its regional form. With no plot or logical progression to 40 numbers such as "Jailhouse Rock" and "Love Potion #9", it's easy to take liberties with the choreography, sets, and costumes. Tony nominee Chet Walker (Pippin) directs and choreographs with great aplomb. Though there are few dance numbers until the performers are well into the first act, when they do arrive they pack punch and charisma. In "Shoppin' for Clothes," performers Nik Alexzander, Robert Fowler, Malcolm Armwood, Seth Danner, and Jody Reynard tell a story sans lyrics, using dress dummies as dance partners.

Walker's inventive hand is most evident in diddies such as "Keep On Rollin'," when the aforementioned barbershop quartet sings their way through the chords, simultaneously using suitcases, shopping bags, and their own thighs as instruments. His direction is at its peak with "Poison Ivy," when his performers don white gloves, humorously itching their way through the music. The lyrics to every song come across because of Walker's clear vision of what the numbers are meant to convey, and are, in turn, expertly executed by the players.

Yvette Clark throws just the right amount of sass at Alexzander in Elvis Presley's hit "Hound Dog" and, with a soaring voice that would be right at home on Broadway, Kate McCann envisions what her life might have been in "Pearl's a Singer." Adding to the great talent of the ensemble are headliners (and Rock and Roll Hall of Famers) The Coasters, the group who recorded over 20 Leiber & Stoller songs including "Dance With Me" and "Yakety Yak." Their cohesive voices and the playfulness in their simplistic snaps add just the right vibe to the production. Eddie Whitfield's bass is especially poignant in "Charlie Brown."

Martin T. Lopez's costumes mix contemporary fashion with mod-ish '50s and '60s frocks in subtle, effective style. The layers of fringe on the hot-pink flapper dress in "Teach Me How to Shimmy" add so much excitement to the frenetic number that the costume is almost its own character. Steve Paladie's set is simple and serviceable in its execution, with brightly lit art-deco squares designed to match the color scheme of any given number.

Smokey Joe's Café ends much like it began, on a sweetly soft note with little pomp and even more sentimentality. It is here that Walker seems to lose his edge. In what could potentially have created a huge finale, there's swaying rather than the fever-pitch level of excitement that harkens back to the good old days of rock 'n' roll. But overall, this Smokey Joe's Café is still worthy of everyone's shimmying.

Read the original article at: http://www.theatermania.com/long-island-theater/reviews/06-2014/smokey-joes-cafe_68956.html

The New York Times - June 20, 2014

A Revue of Pop Songs as Catchy as Poison Ivy

BY AILEEN JACOBSON

Creating a Broadway revue around a songwriting duo who specialized in pop music was a novel idea back in 1995, when “Smokey Joe’s Cafe: The Songs of Leiber and Stoller” made its debut. But it worked. The musical, based on the work of Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, ran for nearly five years, showcasing such beloved tunes as “Dance With Me,” “Kansas City,” “Hound Dog” and “There Goes My Baby.”

Now those songs and others — 39 in all — are rocking the stage at the Gateway Performing Arts Center of Suffolk County in Bellport, in a vibrant production that is scheduled to hit the road in a 20th-anniversary national tour beginning in October.

Chet Walker, the director and choreographer, who was nominated for a Tony last year for choreographing “Pippin,” keeps the energy high and the interactions among cast members intimate. He has created a warmer show than the one on Broadway, which received poor reviews for the most part. Mr. Walker hasn’t added any of the depth or dirt that some critics wanted, but he strikes the right celebratory notes, which is what this show is about.

The cast consists of nine youthful singer-dancers and four more mature performers who are the current incarnation of the ’50s doo-wop group the Coasters. “Yakety Yak,” “Charlie Brown,” “Poison Ivy” and the musical’s title song are among the many tunes, some in the show and some not, that Leiber and Stoller wrote for them. Even though these men (Dennis Anderson, Primo Candelaria, Joe Lance Williams and Eddie Whitfield) are not the original Coasters, they capture the original group’s style and sound.

The scriptless musical begins with “Neighborhood,” a song that refers to “faded pictures in my scrapbook” and “all those friends we used to know” as cast members greet one another with nods or hugs.

The next song, “Young Blood” — one of those that the pair wrote with one or more collaborators — sets the template for several others, a combination of storytelling, humor and romantic longing. Malcolm Armwood, Nik Alexander, Jody Reynard and Robert H. Fowler sing about a heartsick guy who saw a pretty girl and could only stutter “What’s your name.” Later the girl’s father tells him, in a droll passage, “You better leave my daughter alone,” after which the young man spends a forlorn night, thinking, “You’re the one.”

This is followed by Erin McGrath, who has a lovely voice, in “Falling,” a love song with a country twang.

Between numbers, the set of backlit color-block panels, designed by Steve Paladie and lighted by Brian Loesch, moves into different configurations and glows with shifting hues. The panels recall both Mondrian’s gridlike

paintings and those '60s minidresses often worn with go-go boots.

Martin T. Lopez's colorful costumes shine with similar inventiveness. The six-person band, led by David Truskinoff, the music director, sits at the back of the stage. The musicians expertly navigate the wide range of genres, including rock, pop and blues.

Several Leiber and Stoller songs were written for Elvis Presley, whom nobody, thankfully, tries to imitate. "Hound Dog" is presented not in the Elvis version but in the manner intended for Big Mama Thornton, who sang it first. Yvette Monique Clark delivers it with the strong, sassy belter's voice that she also displays in "Fools Fall in Love," "Dance With Me" and "Saved."

The more amusing numbers often feature a narrative, like "Shoppin' for Clothes," in which a guy enters a store and can't decide among three suit jackets. (As in a few other places, the comic acting gets a little too broad.) In "Keep On Rollin'," the sharp male quartet who delivered "Young Blood" appears with suitcases prepared to "buy me a ticket and ride on that B & O." Mr. Walker's choreography enhances the song as, in unison, the men clap their hands on their arms and legs, suggesting the rhythm of a chugging train. In "On Broadway," the same quartet deftly shines one shoe on the back of the other pant leg in the middle of a fast-moving dance.

"Don Juan," in contrast, is a steamy ballad delivered by a woman — the talented Marla McReynolds — informing a fellow who has lost his money that he's lost her, too. The biggest surprise comes at the end, when Mr. Alexander, who has mostly played the clown until then, delivers a soul-baring "I (Who Have Nothing)" that could break your heart. It takes a few songs after that to restore the show's reigning mood of gentle nostalgia.

Read the original article at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/22/nyregion/a-review-of-smokey-joes-cafe-in-bellport.html>