Dance, music, costumes: 'Swing!' has it all

By KATIE HUGHES MCKEE
Posted: 07/01/2010 01:30:30 AM PDT

I was privileged to see Cabrillo Stage's second offering of the season, "Swing!" not once but twice last weekend in the new Crocker Theater at Cabrillo College. Friday, opening night, the audience was largely comprised of family and friends of the cast, many of them actors and dancers themselves who are appearing in CS's upcoming "Cabaret," young people in their 20s who discovered swing music during its revival in the '90s. The Sunday matinee crowd, as usual, looked like a sea of clouds from the back of the house. These were people who actually experienced this music themselves or through their parents playing it around the house as they were growing up. Both audiences were wildly enthusiastic, as was I. Both shows got standing ovations.

This Tony-nominated show opened on Broadway in 1999, and ran for two years. It is an explosive combination of dance, song and orchestra. The eight-piece orchestra, led by CS artistic and music director Jon Nordgren, sounds like 20 thanks to the Tony-nominated orchestrations. The 12 dancers are all rangers: each dancer is featured more than once during the show, effortlessly executing such diverse styles as jive, Latin swing, West Coast swing, and country-western swing.

The songs, by Basie, Arlen, Ellington, Goodman, Carmichael and the like, are delivered by five outstanding performers. Locals Eleanor Hunter and Jennifer Taylor Daniels are faces and voices familiar to Santa Cruz audiences. Jarrod Washington and Ashley Rae Little have each spent four summers with CS. Michael Rhone is making his CS debut.

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Everyone on stage in this show is good at everything. The dancers can sing and act and play musical instruments. The singers act and dance. Jarrod Washington plays ukulele and sax. The musicians sing a little, but what stops the show are two sultry numbers: one with Bill Bosch on bass and dancer Lauren Bjorgan, the other with Eleanor Hunter and Ken Nordgren on trombone.

The choreography by director Janie Scott is literally breathtaking: gasps from the audience abound. Jim Culley has provided a dandy art deco set. Maria Crush's costumes are flawlessly Forties, from the satins and pastels to the sophisticated, formal black and red gowns. Have your sunglasses handy in the second act for a particular pair of lemon yellow socks.

At intermission of the matinee, I spoke to the man next to me, who was obviously enjoying the show. He asked if I were reviewing, and I told him yes, but that it felt strange to be sitting in the reviewer's seat, as I had performed in my first Cabrillo Stage show in 1986. I told him I have seen one of the dancers in this show grow up here, from an orphan in "Annie" to a steampy featured dancer. The director of "Cabaret" did his first show here at 15 and now is a professional in New York. He said, "I think Cabrillo Stage is a treasure in our community." I couldn't agree more.

IF YOU GO
'Swing!' presented by: Cabrillo Stage
directed by: Janie Scott
when: Thursdays and Fridays through July 9 at 7:30 p.m.; Saturdays, through July 17 at 7:30 p.m., Sundays, July 11 and 18 at 2 p.m., Sunday, July 18 at 7:30 p.m.
where: The Crocker Theater, Cabrillo College, Aptos.
Cost: $16 to $38, general; $16 to $36, senior (60+); $16 to $32, child (6-12)
details: 479-6429 or www.cabrillostage.com
note: This production has moved from the old Cabrillo Theater to the new Crocker Theater, one block south, across Soquel Drive.