Americana Bandstand

Cabrillo Stage gets in the groove with exuberant 'Swing'

Movie musicals of the 1930s liked to advertise themselves as “All Singing! All Dancing!” to let Depression-weary audiences know they were in for a good time. In much the same spirit we get “Swing,” the second offering in this year’s expanded Cabrillo Stage summer musical theater season. All singing, all dancing, “Swing” is a lively, uptempo production without dialogue, plot or story, whose energetic ensemble sings and dances its way through more than two dozen classic big-band numbers from the ’30s and ’40s.

Produced on Broadway in 1999 during the swing music revival, the show features mostly familiar standards from the likes of Duke Ellington, Count Basie and Benny Goodman, with a sprinkling of new music by such latter-day swing stylists as Casey MacGill and Jonathan Smith. Directed and choreographed by Janie Scott, the Cabrillo production pares down the material to a couple of hours. Five featured singers jive and scat their way through the vocals under musical director Jon Nordgren, but it’s Scott’s corps of fabulous dancers with their acrobatic, gravity-defying bob routines that keep the show hopping.

Jim Culley’s production design revolves around a bandstand for the eight-man onstage combo that slides up or downstage to provide plenty of room for dancing. Kyle Grant’s evocative lighting makes the most of the clean, Deco geometrics of Culley’s set. The opening Swing Medley sets the tone for the evening, especially when the always hard-working Cabrillo veteran Jarrod Washington and deep-throated Jennifer Taylor Daniels (she was last heard as the voice of Audrey the Plant in “Little Shop Of Horrors”) duet on “It Don’t Mean A Thing If It Ain’t Got That Swing.”

This segment also introduces the rest of the featured vocalists. Ashley Rae Little shows off a great big voice and a sense of humor as a trilling operatic diva who learns to get in the groove. Michael Rhone has plenty of confidence and brash charm as the principal male singer. But the standout of the group may be Eleanor Hunter, whose sure, gorgeous voice soars effortlessly in some of the show’s most memorable numbers.

The show is heavy on big, ensemble production numbers to knock our bobby sox off, like the glittery “Stompin’ at the Savoy” nightclub sequence, or the high-octane “Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy” that kicks off the USO segment. (It’s daring that this song, so closely identified with the Andrews Sisters—let alone Bette Midler—is sung and danced entirely by men, but it works in context here, although the horn playing by Robin Anderson could have been a little snappier on opening night.)

But the show’s highlights are in some of its perfectly executed smaller moments. Hunter and Rhone’s duet, “Blu-Blip”—a musical conversation sung entirely in scat—is a knockout. Little delivers an achingly lovely performance of the ballad, “Skylark.” The bluesy “Harlem Nocturne” becomes a witty, sexy duet for dancer (Lauren Bjorgan) and stand-up bass (played by Bill Bosch). Another instrumental, “Dancers In Love,” is turned into a clever, bravura workout for the shortest and tallest couples in the dance corps. But it’s Hunter’s sensational duet with the pliant trombone of Ken Nordgren on the torchy “Cry Me A River” that steals the show.

Less effective is “Boogie Woogie Country,” one of the newer, non-vintage numbers written for the show. Washington and the dancers perform with plenty of heart, but the hayseed feel of the sequence is a little jarring after the supper-club elegance of the numbers immediately preceding it in Act II.

Maria Crush provides wonderful period-inspired costumes throughout: the male dancers’ zoot suits, and the flippy skirts and bobby socks of the women, the military brass and khakis of the USO sequence, and the singers’ swanky nightclub gowns and tuxes. The atmosphere of clean-cut, jitterbugging, pre-war
Americana on view in “Swing” also provides an interesting counterpoint (and prelude) to the sin-drenched wickedness we can expect from the pre-war Berlin setting of “Cabaret,” coming next month from Cabrillo Stage.

“Swing” runs though July 18 at the Crocker Theater, Cabrillo College campus. Visit cabrillostage.com, or call 831-479-6154.

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