Joe Part Deux
Capitola’s Joe Ortiz re-imagines ‘Escaping Queens’ for a Cabrillo Stage encore  

by Lily Stoicheff

If you didn’t have a chance last year to see Escaping Queens, the much-praised musical co-written by Capitola playwright Joe Ortiz with director Greg Fritsch, you aren’t alone. All eight performances of the then-new show sold out seven weeks before it opened. Cabrillo Stage added three more nights; those filled up, too.

With so many disappointed they didn’t get a chance to see it in 2012, musical director Jon Nordgren requested a reprise this year, with 20 shows. Ortiz and Fritsch agreed—but insisted on a rewrite.

"Jon would have taken it as it was, but we wanted to improve the flow and momentum of the show, and deepen some of the character’s relationships," explains Ortiz.

So he went to work on Escaping Queens, which was inspired by true events from Ortiz’s childhood in 1950s New York, where he lived with his bread-winning and bread-losing father, powerful mother and older sister. The editing process included shortening certain scenes, removing others and improving some of the songs. Ortiz also continued to draw from family lore in order to enrich characters’ pasts, make relationships more potent and heighten conflict.

A fresh crop of actors will be interpreting the show, with two cast members from the original production. Returning audience members will take note of the lack of Lori Rivera, who played Mama in 2012 and contributed to writing the original book. "Last year, Lori was extremely dominant on stage, and the man who played Herman wasn’t as strong substantially," admits Fritsch.

"This year, it’s a much more equal relationship, and the role of the father has a much more clear and dominant role in the family’s life."

"Which is much more true to life," Ortiz adds. "It’s kind of the father’s story. It’s because of him the family gets out of Queens."

To the delight of Fritsch and Ortiz, almost the entire original orchestra has returned for the 2013 season. Fritsch describes how one switch, from a musical theatre pianist to a jazz pianist, has helped translate the songs at a faster, more exciting tempo than they were last year. "The difference is striking," he said.

The unique construction of the original score is one of the most interesting storytelling elements in the show, and very unlike that of a traditional musical.

"I don’t write a traditional score," said Ortiz. "My attitude has always been a different song for a different moment, a different scene. A lot of the songs were inspired by the music I grew up listening to. There’s a doo-wop song, a Latin song, a blues song."

In order to capture that authenticity, a radio was integrated into the show and incorporated into several songs.

"It was another effort to try and get the truth of Joe’s experience into the theatrical event, and still move the plot fluidly," said Fritsch.

There’s almost twice the music in Escaping Queens than in most musicals, but the songs are short and intense. One new song has been added, which is sung by Little Joey as he comes to a crucial realization at the end of Act II.

Despite the changes, the major themes of Escaping Queens remain the same.

"This show is about family and the tenacity of holding a family together, its value and incredible cost," Fritsch explains.

"We’ve all grown up under a level of love and abuse,” asserts Ortiz. "How do we differentiate the two, take the good, and not be overly affected by the abuse? And how do you break the cycle for the next generation? So many people came up to me and said, ‘oh, you’re talking about my family; ‘oh, that’s my father.’ It’s a universal message.”