‘Queens’ as sweet the second time around

By JOANNE ENGELHART

Mix together a half-Italian, half-Puerto Rican family living in Queens, NY, headed by a gambling, cheating, alcoholic father; a straight-arrow mother who loves her family until the death of her flirty daughter pursued by two local street toughs, and a young son eager to smoke and hang out with the older mamas in the neighborhood. Finally: Put them all on stage.

The result would likely be something akin to the well-intentioned “Escaping Queens,” a ethnographic creation of local writer and musician Jose Ortiz, who wrote the lyrics and music as well as the libretto (with director/choreographer Greg Fritz). It was first presented last year at Cabrillo Stage’s summer season and was re-enacted over the past year. The light-opera-like musical opened Thursday with almost a complete new cast and runs through Aug. 18.

For most of the cast, the job of singing is the well-worn kitchen of Mama to passionate, warm-hearted Vanessa Alvarez and Herman (Adam Saccar, playing a breastfeeding capable father). Mark Hopkins’ scenic design centers on the luminized, faded top of the kitchen table and the 1962 look of the rest of the kitchen (although the elongated refrigerator seems far more old-fashioned). On the fringes of the set are a large streetlight, the scene of many street encounters, and several low-sitting staircase that offer scenic variety.

The strong repining of several songs, the pictures of the film dialogues, and the large show of emotions which is not always a good thing. This show actually pulls out for more dialogue because when Mr. Kneelby lyrics to move along the story, the song’s words don’t communicate as fully (and some words can’t be heard over the orchestra).

Conductor/pianist Max Wellstem-Parker wields a lot of his four fellow musicians, who rarely have more than a minute or two between songs. In the number “Unlucky at Jo’s,” therenched beat of Michael Mraz’s drums reverberates throughout the theater; a nice counterpoint to the “lousy” song and sounds done by daughter Laura (Samantha Pfeiffer) and her beau Johnny (Johnny Goldby and Mark Fruhm). Both Gould and Fruhm also plates Freddie (the lard-creep Herman) and in fishing escapades have top-notch voices that are not at all bad together where Gould’s leather-jacketed, socked-back front face person is likable and his duets with Pistoreal-esque Prances and his at her best when, as Freddie, he so captivates Mama by singing “Sicilia” about his native Sicily that she joins him in song.

Pistoreal musters a wide range of song styles, and while she is successful most of the time, on a few occasions, she was off-key and doesn’t emanate clearly enough. At the start of Act 1, she is part of the ensemble of “Mama’s Little Kitchen,” then joins Mama and her sister, Rose (verses Danielle Cooke, who also plays Estela, Herman’s mistress) in “Coney.” Her vocals in both songs are unclear. Fortunately, she improves as the play goes along, and her acting is uniformly solid.

Cooke is a marvelous voice as both Mama’s helpful, sympathetic sister and as the sultry siren who (for some unfathomable reason) loves the hasp Herman. Both she and Fruhm have learned some Masoni quick-change tricks because the characters and costumes alternate between quite different.

The remaining cast member is a Little Joey, 18-year-old Devon DeLeon who just about steals any scene he’s in. Whether he’s wearing a leather jacket and initating the street toughs or being Mama’s little helper, he is captivating — and funny — to boot. His solo “Cowboy” in Act 2 seems at first as an afterthought, but when DeLeon puts on an overheat and hits it to Fred’s in “Little Joey’s Swing,” he simply brings down the house.

There are some comical moments in “Queens” — most of them involving Suzanne whose facial expressiveness change swiftly from anger to charm to alarm to being devilish. Example: He sings his solo playing a lazy woman’s slip and a white mop as a wig. He shows his characteristic when he and Alvarez team up for several numbers including the song “She Feeds Me Macaroni! (If I Need my Rice and Beans)”. Some of the best musical moments of “Queens” occur when the three female cast members join in two (and sometimes three-part harmonies. Alvarez and Cooke (as Rose) are reflective and assertive in “A Few Moments of Magic” and Pistoreal joins them for the haunting “The Ballad of Johnny and Laura.” Two other musical highlights are the song “Nevermind” sung with voice and attitude by the four main cast members, and “Siapaapan” (Spanish for “I hear that you can’t,” sung by Herman and the ensemble.

But there are several good songs that really wouldn’t be missed if they were cut (which would then leave more time for some extended dialogue). Ortiz has a number of memorable sayings, very nice in “Queens,” so he or she should be authorized to handle discourse. Some examples: “One girl ruined everything.” “If you don’t want this dinner you can throw it out the window,” and “Go play in traffic” when Mama wants to get her kids out of the house.

Erica L. Schweier keeps her costumes authentically 1960s, other than Pistoreal’s tight jeans and too-modern scarf. Hopkins’ lighting is effective, and Nick Morra manages some tricky sound situations well, even if the audience is the right sound between Masoni and John- ny done perfectly in slow-motion.

Overall, “Escaping Queens” has much promise and some occasional acting. It’s definitely a good bet to see it before it escapes Cabrillo Stage.