

ROUTE 66

Reviewed by Gail M. Burns, July, 2003 (copyright Gail M. Burns, 2003)

Ok, I confess, I just don't get it. I don't understand the current popularity of staged musical revues. To me they just aren't theatre. They are concerts with costumes, and if that's what you want why not spend the cash to see Elton John or Cher or someone else who has perfected the art?

But I suppose that I am in the minority on this. People across the country seem to just love this kind of show, and now they are making their way to local stages in increasing numbers. Already this season the Mac-Haydn has offered us Smokey Joe's Café and Always...Patsy Cline, and now the Theater Barn is bringing Route 66 to Columbia County. To me this is a particularly peculiar type of a genre I don't understand. Smokey Joe is a collection of songs by the same composer/lyricist team and Always... is a tribute to the legendary Patsy Cline, and it has a book of sorts. Route 66 is a random collection of songs about cars, trucks, driving, and the towns along the now defunct highway of the title sung by four pleasant but anonymous young men.

I realize that I am kvetching about the show and not the production. The production is perfectly good. Since all the four young men have to do is sing, dance a little, and not collide with the scenery, they are more than up to the task. I liked them. They are easy on the eyes and they all sing well. I wish I had been given a chance to know more about them. I highly recommend studying the headshots in the lobby thoroughly before entering the theatre, because otherwise it will take you a while to be able to tell these fellows apart.

Once I caught on to who was who, however, I became more and more impressed with Jason Nettle. There is something seriously weird about the guy, and I like that in a man. He also really knows how to belt out a song. His solo on Every Woman I Know was the first number in the show that really made me sit up and take notice. Later in the evening he gets seriously silly in Long Tall Texan, Truck Stop Cutie, and Don't Haul Bricks on 66. As Charles Ludlam so eloquently put in it The Mystery of Irma Vep, "Any man who dresses up as a woman can't be all bad." Nettle also plays guitar nicely on several numbers.

My second favorite was Dan Pacheco, who shines his brightest in quiet moments. I loved his solo turns on The Girl on the Billboard and King of the Road, and I was also moved by his duet with Shaun Roberts on The Mother Road. Roberts is an appealing young performer, who also did nicely on his quiet solo Oklahoma Hills, and added pizzazz to the group numbers.

Joseph Mayon has a nice, classically trained tenor, but has an oddly maniacal gleam in his eye which drove me nuts in this particular role. He might be brilliantly cast as an evil genius or mad scientist in some wackier evening of entertainment.

There is no book and the performers appear as themselves, sans character names. The job of director/choreographer Steven Petrillo in this case is to come up with ways to stage 30 different numbers differently enough that the audience doesn't get bored. He succeeds admirably, with the assistance of many costumes by Melanie Spalding. I am a sucker for people whizzing around a stage on office chairs, and I got a real kick out of the two comedy numbers – Beep, Beep (featuring an hilarious turn by Pacheco) and Diesel on My Tail – which employed that device. Abe Phelps has designed a spare but functional set. I enjoyed many of the old advertising signs on the wall, they brought back memories! Allen Phelps lighting, usually so nicely done you don't notice it, contained some changes in color and brightness so sudden that they literally hurt my eyes this time around.

The performers are backed up by a three piece off-stage band directed by Kasey RT Graham, consisting of Graham on the piano, Roger Mason on bass, and percussionist Jason Schultheis. Petrillo and Graham also allow several numbers to be sung a cappella, or with Nettle's guitar accompaniment, which is a treat since these four young men sing so nicely. It is a real treat to attend an unmiked musical performance these days. I know that mikes are necessary in many spaces, but the Theater Barn is small and has good acoustics. What a pleasure to hear real voices coming out of real people for a few hours!

So, if you are in the majority and just love staged musical revues, "Route 66" is a very pleasant way to spend a few hours.

Route 66 runs through August 3 at The Theater Barn, located on Rt. 20 in New Lebanon, NY. The show runs an hour and forty minutes and is suitable for the whole family. Call the box office at 518-794-8989 for tickets.