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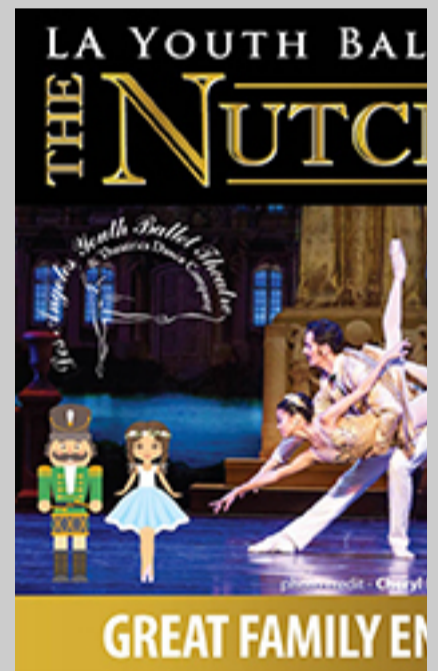
Celebrating girl-group hits of the 1950s and '60s, 'The Marvelous Wonderettes' opens Friday at Sierra Madre Playhouse

Posted by Bliss Bowen | Jul 20, 2017 | 0 🗨️ | ★★★★★



According to Roger Bean, his career as a jukebox musical playwright and producer happened by accident: he started writing so he could get employed as a director. When he asked the Milwaukee Repertory Theatre in 1998 how he could work for them, he was advised to check out a cabaret show and write something similar.

“Not knowing any better, I said, ‘Oh, I can do that,” he recalls, laughing. “I didn’t know enough to know that it



UPCOMING EVENTS

DEC

6

Wed

(https://www.pasadenaweekly.com/calendar/action-oneday/exact_date~12-6-2017/)

10:30 am

Book and Holiday Events at Vroman's

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can be really difficult. But what you don't know can sometimes be a nice benefit."

He eventually created several shows for Milwaukee Rep, including "The Marvelous Wonderettes," the second show that he wrote. It weaves girl-group hits from the 1950s and '60s into a story about four high school girls. It eventually played off-Broadway and in 2007 earned an Ovation Award for Best Musical Intimate Theatre in Los Angeles; a new production opens at Sierra Madre Playhouse Friday night.

The show is one of several contributions that Bean, who now runs his own licensing company, has made to the "jukebox musical" genre.

"There weren't that many shows at that time in this genre," he says. "It was all kind of new and exciting, and people started wanting to do my shows."

Jukebox musicals have experienced an uptick in popularity since 1990's "Forever Plaid" became a feel-good hit and the ABBA-inspired "Mamma Mia!" caused a sensation on London's West End in 1999. 2001's "Love, Janis," 2005's "Jersey Boys," 2006's "Ring of Fire," 2009's "Fela!" and a parade of others followed.

For producers, jukebox musicals have obvious marketing benefits. For audiences, it's a trip down memory lane with performers who hopefully tap into the music's vitality.

"It does create this kind of nostalgia around memories, and people have very specific memories around music," Bean observes. "That's one of the reasons why it's successful. That's not really the impetus for writing it. I'm always trying to tell some weird story that's in my brain and wants to get out. But songs from the '50s, '60s, and I'm working on a country show ['Honky Tonk Laundry'] right now with songs from the '70s — when songs were more about songwriting, those songs are great story songs. So I want it to be a part of musical theater. I find it fun to figure out how to get those stories told."

Inspired by Bean's discovery that his mom had been a high school songleader, "The Marvelous Wonderettes" circles around a high school singing group — and prom. The Sierra Madre Playhouse lobby is already colorfully adorned with paper flowers, tinsel, and a magnetic prom queen-and-king display. Onstage, Act One occurs on prom night in 1958; Act Two takes the foursome 10 years forward to their high school reunion. Over the course of the play they perform classics such as "It's In His Kiss," "It's My Party," "Leader of the Pack," "Lipstick On Your Collar," "Lollipop," "Mister Sandman," "Rescue Me," "R-E-S-P-E-C-T," "Son of a Preacher Man," "Stupid Cupid" and "You Don't Own Me." "The Twist" is not performed but Chubby Checkers' dance move is incorporated into the choreography, along with the Stroll, the Jerk, and the

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7

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Swim.

Sung in tight four-part harmony, the songs shape the generally comedic storyline. Names mentioned in famous '50s songs pop up in conversation between the sharply delineated leads as they mention offstage characters. Director Robert Marra estimates there are about 27 numbers in the show, but several are medleys so the total of recognizable songs is “probably more like 32 to 35. It’s a big show; even though it’s an intimate show, it’s a lot of material for those girls to learn. It’s been a challenging rehearsal process.”

The “girls” are Kelsey Boze (Cindy Lou Huffington), Kelly Klopocinski (Suzy Simpson), Kate Ponzio (Betty Jean Reynolds) and Afton Quast (Missy Miller). A live band will be heard but not seen performing behind the stage’s brick wall backdrop and a black-and-white collage of yearbook photos. A magenta-pink platform centerstage evokes a vintage Barbie doll aesthetic — an observation that elicits a hearty laugh from Marra.

The New York-raised actor-turned-director helmed 2015’s “Always ... Patsy Cline” and last year’s Ovation Award-nominated “The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee” at the Playhouse, and has also directed productions at Glendale Centre Theatre. For him, the benefit of working in a smaller space like the Playhouse’s 99-seater is its intimacy.

“When I direct, and when I choreograph, what’s most important to me is storytelling,” he says. “I always tell my actors, ‘You can be the best singer in the world, you can be the best dancer in the world, but if you’re not telling the story, if you’re not moving me, if you’re not moving the audience, they’ll think, ‘Uh, you have a beautiful voice’ or ‘You’re a great dancer.’”

“In a larger theater, things have to be a little bigger, a little more exaggerated. [Here] you can have a lovely, intimate moment where one of the actresses is singing a beautiful ballad, and she can be subtly expressing what’s going on, and the audience is right there catching that. It’s real, it’s honest. It doesn’t feel put on.”

“The Marvelous Wonderettes” opens Friday at Sierra Madre Playhouse, 87 W. Sierra Madre Blvd., Sierra Madre, and plays at 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays and 2:30 p.m. Sundays through Aug. 27; \$25-\$35. Info: (626) 355-4318. themarvelouswonderettes.com, sierramadreplayhouse.org, rogerbean.com, robertmarra.com

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