

The Marvelous Wonderettes wow San Jose Rep's audience!

Saturday, June 19, 2010



1958, the year I graduated from Klamath Union High School, was a very special year for many reasons. First and foremost, I was at a high spot in my life, having my own disc jockey show as a student broadcaster on radio Station KFLW, had been at the top of my class in Radio English, had done well in my drama class, had a beautiful ballerina as a girlfriend and had gone on active duty in the United States Navy. My mother, Juanita, had just gotten one of her “rock-a-billy” songs (Driving Me Out of My Mind) released on the “B” side of Johnny Stark’s hit record, “Rockin’ Billy” which showcased and was wildly successful on Dick Clark’s American Bandstand, climbing into the top “40” nationwide. I’d personally met Bill Haley and the Comets and Jerry Lee Lewis and was even attempting to write my own rock and roll music. For me, life was great in ‘58!

Life was great in ‘58 at Springfield High according to director and musical creator Roger Bean, as he brings to fruition the story of a four gal singing group who had begun performing for local gigs under the name of “The Marvelous Wonderettes”. These were the days when we were jumping out of our skin with vitality, undaunted by life’s challenges, eager to take on the world, or felt we were madly in love in our first real romance. It was a very special time in almost all of our lives and Director Bean brings that crazy time back into focus with this wonderful and amusing musical entitled “The Marvelous Wonderettes”.

The San Jose Repertory Theater is now show-casing this musical for a limited run right now in San Jose. Bean’s musical is stopping off in San Jose following a long Broadway run, and it reprises the experiences of many of us at that time in our lives when we were in our late teens.

More than a simple reprise of music of that period, Mr. Bean has very cleverly taken themes and characters out of songs very popular at that time and woven these characters into the fabric of his story. All through this delightful musical, lyrics from song after song are incorporated into the story of these girl’s lives, their highlights and travails.

The songs in this traveling musical are not all from 1958, but they are representative of the musical styles prevalent from this era, songs like “Mr. Lee” which was recorded in 1957 by one of the first successful girl groups in the rock era, the Bobbettes. This Harlem girl-group found gold in this recording that not only cracked the top ten, but also was a number one hit on the Rhythm and Blues (R&B) charts. The song was actually inspired by “one of their school teachers”. “It’s My Party” (and I’ll cry if I want to - -) was a big hit for Leslie Gore in 1963 and “Secret Love” written for the movie Calamity Jane was first recorded by Doris Day in 1953, the “Moonglows” in 1954 and Connie Francis in 1962, but found its way into this song list for this musical because it is a song from that era that brings fond memories and adds to the story line, even if it was never made popular by a girl group. Connie Francis found platinum with “Lipstick on Your Collar” in 1959 and the McGuire sisters savored great success in 1954 with “Goodnight Sweetheart, Goodnight”. There are 33 songs in this show that rock, that swing, that romanticize, that will bring back a flood of memories, but perhaps none more for me than the song that extended the Everly Brothers name as a household word with “All I Have To Do Is Dream”, which was actually released in March of 1958, reached #1 on the "Most played by Jockeys" and "Top 100" charts on May 19, 1958, which was right about the time of the fictitious Springfield High Prom, around which this musical is centered.

Four delightfully talented ladies, all professional entertainers, portray the four youthful singers in a newly formed all gal group, Bets Malone (as Suzy), Holly Davis (as Betty Jean), Christina DeCicco (s Cindy Lou) and Lowe Taylor (as Missy), who call themselves “The Marvelous Wonderettes”. The graduation prom entertainment program had been assigned to a popular boys’ singing group when the leader of the group, Billy-Ray, finds himself in deep trouble with his father and is grounded. The Marvelous Wonderettes are thus given the opportunity to perform at their graduation prom, providing the opportunity for the gals to step up to the plate and to provide the entertainment. They appear to be nervous, unprofessional, and defiantly amateurish but at the same time, a great group of friends trying out their wings. While attempting to perform their routine, it becomes obvious that they have personal preoccupations as well: Betty Jean and Cindy Lou are best friends and at the same time are competing for the same boyfriend. Cindy Lou fully expects to be prom queen, playing to the hilt her image of herself as a teen beauty queen. Betty Jean is a master of getting attention, constantly pulling pranks on Cindy Lou, just to deflate Cindy’s ego inflated balloon. Suzy is enamored with Ritchie, the prom’s lighting engineer, and Missy has a crush on Mr. Lee, a teacher. Missy and Suzy may be designed as the least glamorous of the four gals, but when their big song numbers arrive, their voices deliver the goods powerfully. In reality, these four women are as professional as it gets, a triple threat, as they have exquisite voices (when they are not goofing around), they are superb actors and they have tons of experience as professional entertainers.

They are also incredibly adept at coaxing the audience into participating as fellow classmates. We the audience become the “classmates” at the prom. There will even be a chance for the audience to vote before intermission, for the 1958 Prom Queen, which includes (believe it or not) the same four gals!

We never meet the other characters that are incorporated from the songs into the story line, except for Mr. Lee, centerpiece from the song “Mr. Lee”. A “Mr. Lee” is coaxed from the audience (unbeknownst to him), to play his unscripted part on the stage. This unnamed guest from the audience is expected to play along and provides a great boost to the fun in the show.

During the first act of the musical, the ladies sing their repertoire of songs at the 1958 prom, an event which is set in the high school gymnasium. These gals, all on the cusp of adulthood, demonstrate their friendship and conflicts and competitive nature, in what becomes an uproariously funny musical program, presenting an endearing and upbeat jukebox musical to top them all.

When the audience comes back after intermission for the second act, we find we are all now gathering for the 10th year reunion of the class of ’58, in the same gym, with the same four ladies, the same Wonderettes, again providing the evening’s entertainment, but now a little older and a little wiser. While Suzy is as ditzy as ever, she is now very pregnant and there is trouble in paradise. Missy has been dating Mr. Lee for 6 long years without a ring. Cindy Lou has returned to

Springfield following a trip to Hollywood and a failed attempt at becoming an actress and Betty Jean is on the romantic rebound. The songs are now a little more melancholy with songs like "Rescue Me" and "Wedding Bell Blues". The beat picks up, and with the up tempo comes the feminine inner strength and the ladies take control.

Not since "Mama Mia" and the music of ABBA stormed the country a few years ago, have I experienced such a fun-filled cleverly written musical, mined from the content of the music itself. The magic of the music we listened to in the 50's was that it had a story to tell, and a melody that had staying power.

"The Marvelous Wonderettes" provides a super fun-filled evening of music and comedy, romance and poignancy and in the final analysis, as we used to say on the radio, a little "waxin' for relaxin'". Yes, this is a great way to kick back and at the same time, bring back fond memories of the days when we spun real records, 45's, 78's and 33's on a phonograph; when we did such disrespectful things as smooch in the back seat on lover's lane, drank sodas at the "Do Drop Inn" and walked or dragged main street with our classmates. Those were the days! This is a terrific Show!

"The Marvelous Wonderettes" is in town on a very short run that continues tonight and tomorrow, Tuesdays at 7:30 p.m., Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturdays (at 3 p.m. and 8 p.m.) and Sundays at 2 p.m. and closing after the Sunday evening performance on the 27th, which begins at 7 pm. It is a real shame that this show will only remain in the Bay Area for one more week. Tickets range between \$35 and \$74 each. Call (408) 367-7255 for reservations or visit their web site at <http://www.sjrep.com/> for additional information. The San Jose Repertory Theatre is a beautiful facility, easy to reach and always rewarding. The San Jose Repertory Company Theatre is located at 101 Paseo de San Antonio, between 2nd and 3rd Streets, one block north of East San Carlos Street.