

LA TIMES REVIEW FROM MARCH 2008

CABARET REVIEW

Ron Abel adds right touch to a Monday

The Actors Fund's showcase has plenty of first-rate numbers to choose from and nine masterful singers to perform them.

By Don Heckman

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Ron Abel is one of the busiest multi-hyphenates in the musical-theater world. So it was appropriate that the Actors Fund kicked off its 2008 "Musical Mondays" cabaret series with a showcase presentation of Abel's music Monday night in the Art Deco lobby of the Pantages Theatre.

Many similar honorees might have been content to simply sit back and enjoy the plaudits. But not Abel, who also played piano, sang, wrote the arrangements and led the five-piece band backing the cast of nine stellar vocalists.

Abel's busy career has embraced composing, producing, arranging and conducting as well as scores for a string of musicals, including the critically acclaimed "Blame It on the Movies." So there was plenty of material from which to choose for his presentation of nearly 20 songs -- and plenty of diverse interpretations from his singers.

Three songs -- "Let 'Em Talk," "Where Do I Find Love?" and "Same Old Moon" -- were turned over to the ebullient voice of singer-dancer Valarie Pettiford, who transformed every note into a tour de force. Impressive as her performance may have been as big-stage projection, its larger-than-life qualities sometimes seemed a bit out-sized -- for both the songs and the intimate environs of the Pantages lobby.

A pair of first-rate numbers inspired by the 1955 film "Marty" took a different interpretive tack. Marsha Kramer and Wayne Moore sang "Dogs Like Us" (based on a classic Ernest Borgnine line from the film) with a communicative theatricality perfectly framed for the small stage.

And Moore's version of "She Just Happened to Me" was the ideal follow-up, a poignant expression of the depth of everyday love, delivered with precisely the right touch of believability.

Other highlights included Linda Purl's whisper-in-your-ear rendering of the touching love song "Just to Be Near You" (written, as were the majority of the songs, with lyricist Chuck Steffan); a pair of Abel duets with Christa Jackson ("Funny How Love") and Lucie Arnaz ("Forever's All We Know"); and Joely Fisher's bawdy take on the whimsical "All the Good Men Are Gay." Giselle Wolf's reading of "It's Been a Long Time" found the song's heart, as did Arnaz's version of "Until Now." But Joey Gian, like Pettiford, approached "I Met an Angel" and "Slow Dancing" with big-voiced drama that soared past the songs' inner subtleties.

The evening climaxed, appropriately, with a look toward Abel's vital future in songs from the newly completed "Bricktop" -- a musical-theater version of the life of the fabled Parisian nightclub owner. Loretta Devine sang the show's two principal songs -- "A Place of My Own" and "Queen of the Night" -- with stunning style and panache, the combination of Abel's music and her vocal gymnastics capturing both the essence of the character and the memory of an era.

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