Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

A Beaut of a Musical

Sylvie · Wednesday, June 29th, 2016

Anyone old enough to know and love the music of Carole King would have been waiting eagerly for *Beautiful, the Carole King Musical*, to make its Los Angeles appearance. It did that on Friday, and my bet is that no one was disappointed. This jaunty evening of musical comedy — a swift, breezy mix of nostalgia, great songs, spirited dance, humor, tenderness and romance from the 1950s and 60s — is just gentle enough, entertaining enough, kind and appealing to those very audiences that would be King's most perceptive and receptive admirers.

In truth, it would be difficult to dislike any part of this bio-jukebox musical, which got hold of King's music — with her consent if not her direct participation — and is creatively sensitive enough to honor her real-life struggles without diminishing or abusing them. If there is a level of gloss and predictability in what emerges on stage, so be it. Surprises are not what this show is about. Songs, sentiment and abiding affection are.

Playing famous people is tricky business and, in this case, Abby Mueller in the role of Carole King is not only taking on a huge musical icon, but unintentionally, she also is competing with her sister Jessie Mueller, who created the role on Broadway, winning a Tony for her performance. Well, Abby, no need to apologize. This Mueller too provides just the right qualities of modest self-effacement, sweetness and big talent that we know belong to the real Carole King.

Abby Mueller as Carole King in *Beautiful* at The Pantages Theatre.

But *Beautiful* offers more. To keep the show honest and on an even keel as it navigates through the rapids of King's marital crises with her troubled husband and creative partner Gerry Goffin (the engaging Liam Tobin), book writer Doug McGrath has done a delicately balanced job of acknowledging the humor and the sadness of the story, without straying too far in either direction.

By prominently including and engaging with the hypochondriacal tendencies and powerful talents of Barry Mann (played with just enough whimsy by Ben Fankhauser) and the spontaneously dry wit of his partner and wife Cynthia Weil (a lively Becky Gulsvig), these "best friends and fierce competitors" of Goffin and King give the show spirit, fun and some welcome laughter. The show also delivers some half-dozen well-chosen bright songs of Mann/Weil composition ("On Broadway," "You've Lost That Lovin' Feelin'" among them).

l-r, Curt Bouril, Liam Tobin, Abby Mueller,Ben Fankhauser and Becky Gulsvig in *Beautiful* at The Pantages Theatre.

The entire enterprise was and is no small undertaking. Thanks to Marc Bruni's supple direction, we sail through Goffin's episodes of instability and repeated marital failings without losing sight of the

deep love that drew these two hugely talented people to each other in the first place. Serving as a fulcrum to the surrounding action, Curt Bouril as music producer Don Kirshner towers like a benevolent ringmaster over all these budding musicians. If the prevailing emotion is bewilderment at success after success, the ultimate break-up of the central couple is handled with a compassion that, as it did in life, culminates in forgiveness.

The show's other big achievement is its enjoyable recreation of a fertile period in popular music history, poking subtle fun at the stylized singing/dancing favored by the top groups of the time — just as that music was poised to transition into something much wilder and crazily different known as rock'n'roll and everything that came with it.

Derek McClane's busy multi-level set and Peter Kaczorowski's restless lighting capture the frenzy and intense competitiveness of a fevered music business, with its passing parade of individuals and groups so emblematic of that era (The Drifters, the Shirelles, Neil Sedaka). With a nice touch of irony, Josh Prince's period choreography reflects the upcoming demise of the old giving way to the new — a music scene about to soar and radically transform itself.

Josh A. Dawson, Paris Nix, Jay McKenzie, and Noah J. Ricketts as The Drifters in *Beautiful* at The Pantages Theatre.

Two small reservations here: first, while Alejo Vietti's costumes and Charles G. LaPointe's hairstyles nicely mark the altering fashions and passage of time, some of LaPointe's wigs could look more natural than they do to properly emulate this "natural woman" and her friends.

Secondly, and more important, in McGrath's script the character of King's mother, Genie Klein (played by Suzanne Grodner) settles for a facile and obvious kind of comedy. Klein was, in fact, a colorful woman of infinite variety and abilities, both musical and theatrical, who became a theatre critic later in life. She passed away in 2011 and deserved a more nuanced approach than she is given here. Grodner, has no choice other than to play it as written, but Carole King's mother was more than this.

Top image: The cast of Beautiful, The Carole King Musical *at "1650 Broadway on the Los Angeles Pantages stage.*

Photos by Joan Marcus.

WHAT: ***Beautiful, The Carole King Musical***

WHERE: Hollywood Pantages Theatre, 6233 Hollywood Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90028

WHEN: Tuesdays-Fridays, 8pm; Saturdays, 1 & 6:30pm; Sundays, 2 & 8pm. Ends July 17. Call for exceptions.

HOW: Tickets start at $29, available at www.HollywoodPantages.com or (800) 982-2787

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