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PLAY REVIEW: 'Smokey Joe's Cafe' a good time for all

By Mike Dougherty / Staff Writer

Coming in from the 92-degree heat on a Saturday afternoon, a visitor to Arkansas Repertory Theatre at first was glad to be in off the street. But the real treat began when the curtain went up for the matinee performance of "Smokey Joe's Cafe, The Songs of Lieber and Stoller."

The show, directed and choreographed by Ron Hutchins, is a collection of the amazing body of pop music written in the 1950s and '60s by Jerry Lieber and Mike Stoller. The revue tells a comic story of love, loss and life from that time without benefit of dialog.

A cast of nine talented singer-dancers, backed by six wonderful musicians, takes the audience on a journey through that seemingly simpler time with songs that tugged at the heart strings and forced some sing-along by the audience.

The comic interplay, via facial expressions and body language, was a tribute to the cast's acting abilities. Laughter broke out in the audience often, without a word of nonmusical dialog.

The premise was established with the cast weaving in and out on the opening number, "Neighborhood."

An early highlight was "Searchin'," which featured Eric LaJuan Summers, backed by Darius Harper, Terrence Clowe and the wonderful bass voice of Alexander Elisa. That was followed by "Kansas City," by Alltrinna Grayson, Amy Miller Brennan and Matthew Ragas, a native of New Orleans.

Then Morgan Smith and the stunning Krisha Marcano from Trinidad strutted their stuff in "Trouble."

Harper and Brennan were excellent together in the "Love Me/Don't" medley.

"Poison Ivy," featuring Clowe, backed by Harper, Elisa and Summers, was great fun. The same quartet, led by Harper, was stellar with "On Broadway."

The first act concluded with a stirring rendition of "Saved" by Grayson and the rest of the cast.

Moving the setting to the title-themed "Smokey Joe's" club, the entire company got things moving in Act II with comic efforts of "Baby, That is Rock 'n' Roll," "Yakety Yak" and "Charlie Brown."

Brennan showed off her pipes with a moving, yet funny, effort on "Pearl's A Singer."

Ragas' "character" tried to keep up with the blazing-fast hips of Smith in "Teach Me How To Shimmy." Grayson again sparkled on "Hound Dog."

The four female cast members were exceptional on "I'm A Woman," while the five males were featured on the "Jailhouse Rock" number, with dancing help from Smith and Brennan.

Summers was strong on "I (Who Have Nothing)" and Harper led the company in a rousing version of "Stand By Me" into the closing reprise of "Baby, That Is Rock 'n' Roll."

The singing was strong, the dancing, especially by Smith, was very good.

The music by Eric Alsford (piano), Terrie Shires (synthesizer), Brian Wolverson (bass), Steve Hudelson (guitar), Barry McVinney (saxophone) and Patrick Lindsey (drums and percussion) was superb.

“Smokey Joe’s Cafe” continues at The Rep through June 27. Ticket information is available by calling 378-0405 or going to the website, therep.org.