

Arts & Culture

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Performance

This *Café* is a trip to a rock 'n' roll past

By David Cannon
Sentinel Arts Critic

With rap and techno music being popular these days, some people question whether rock 'n' roll has had its time in the sun and that era is now over. How apt that at Bethesda Theater currently has a lively musical revue celebrating the dawn of the rock 'n' roll era called *Smokey Joe's Café*.

The names Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller may not be household words but they are more familiar than you think. As songwriters and producers, Leiber and Stoller were responsible for some of the biggest acts in early rock history. Elvis Presley recorded over 20 of their songs including such iconic hits as "Hound Dog" and "Jailhouse Rock."

On a more comical vein was a string of hits for the Coasters including "Yakketty Yak" and "Charlie Brown." For other artists came hits such as "Stand By Me," "Love Potion #9" and "On Broadway." The 1950s and early 1960s saw one Leiber and Stoller success story after another.

This is a musical revue of the old fashioned variety, which means no story, minimal dialogue and narration and one song after another. After all, these early songs are teenage epics in miniature. The cast at Bethesda is young and energetic, and throw themselves into selling these early rock nuggets. While



PHOTO BY STAN BAROUH

8. Miles Johnson in "D.W. Washburn" in the all-new production of *SMOKEY JOE'S CAFÉ* at the Bethesda Theatre.

each performer has a good solo moment, rarely do they break out from the ensemble. The exceptions are Aurelia Williams, doing a great comic turn in "Dance With Me" plus a different take on "Hound Dog" and Miles Johnson with his comic turn as "DW Washburn" to end the first half.

I wish the sets and technical aspects of the show were better, and hopefully they will improve as the run continues. One thing that could be better is John Whiteman's sets. The multi-layer set pieces move on and off fine enough, but the large screens used for projections and hiding set changes move noisily in place, and

occasionally seem to have a mind of their own. The large panels are used for projections but the photos rarely come out clearly.

Otherwise, the first act is many of the early and lesser-known early songs by the songwriters. Still there are the comic gems "Poison Ivy" and "Don Juan" and a comical dance routine with Miles shopping for clothes and the manikins getting into the act. The most familiar number here is "On Broadway," although the gospel tinged "Saved" brings the act to a rousing finish.

In the second half are most of the well-known numbers. One hit follows another here – from the lush "Spanish Harlem" to another comic gem in "Little Egypt" to a sassy "I'm a Woman." There is an occasional lapse here – the "Jailhouse Rock" number seemed a little too over the top – but in general this act is a treasure trove of early rock tunes.

Smokey Joe's Café continues at the Bethesda Theater through May 11. For more information, call 301-657-7827 or go online to www.bethesdatheatre.com.

Smokey Joe's Café

★★★

Bethesda Theater

Multi-faced *Doors* opens audiences to a world of fun

By David Cannon
Sentinel Arts Critic

Let me say that the current show at Silver Spring Stage *Communicating Doors* is the best comedy involving murder mysteries and time travel I have yet seen. Admittedly, the number of comedies involving murder mysteries and time travel is not large, but this Alan Ayckbourn play is one of the most entertaining comedies in a while and the Stage's production is top notch.

Ayckbourn is often described as a British Neil Simon, but except for being a prolific comedy writer, the comparison ends there. Ayckbourn loves his theatrical tricks, and *Communicating Doors* is one of his most elaborate. The writer is also fascinated by the foibles of marital and family relationships and that also takes center stage here.

Basic set up is in a not too distant future where Britain seems to be wracked by a lot of urban disturbances. The details are sketchy but Ayckbourn does include tantalizing hints. A "sexual specialist" (OK, dominatrix) named Poopay visits an elderly client named Reece but he doesn't want her for typical reasons. He wants her to witness and sign a confession where Reece admits that with his partner Julian, he killed his first two wives, plus a number of other crimes. Big surprise – Julian is not happy about this written confession.

Why exactly the communicating doors – which join one hotel room to another – should become a time traveling device is never made clear, but Poopay discovers this fact when hiding from Julian. From there we go into three time frames with recurring characters and separate dangers. Can Poopay save herself and both of Reece's previous wives or will everyone scoff at this time traveling gimmick even as the clock continues ticking.

Ayckbourn invents his own time travel laws and rules but he sticks with them once in place. The playwright also invents a number of interesting characters such as those previous wives, a much harried but not too reliable secu-

rity guard and Julian himself, a villain with his own set of quirks. The play is basically a comedy but there are suspenseful moments and some intellectual time paradoxes to resolve.

Director Lenora Dernoga clearly understands one thing – this whole time traveling gimmick falls apart if you think too much about it, so she keeps the pace moving at a quick clip. Changes in time and environment are suggested by simple means with the male characters at times undergoing quick makeup changes. We always know where we are, no matter what time frame we are in or who is using those time traveling doors at the moment. It could get very complicated but both Ayckbourn and the Stage's production keep it easy to follow. Plus



PHOTO BY NEIL EDGELL

Rachel Duda (Jessica).

there is an incredibly funny moment involving the balcony that had to be difficult to block but comes off beautifully.

This is really a showcase for the actresses. Rachel Demma as Poopay, Rachel Duda as first wife Jessica and Toni Carmine as second wife Ruella do a great job as three women in a strange situation across decades who come to rely on one another. James Raby as Julian, Peter Nigra as Reece and Eric Burgan as Harold provide good support, staying consistent despite changing situations and decades.

All of this time traveling scenario could be a gimmick and little more, but there is a surprise that I will not spoil. Let's just say that you cannot predict the ending, even though in retrospect it makes very logical sense. It is also a surprisingly emotional ending, which makes this play one of Ayckbourn's most satisfying. After going through all this romping through time you would expect this script to arrive some place. There is a lot of heart in this final destination.

Communicating Doors continues at Silver Spring Stage through May 4. For more information, call 301-593-6036 or go online to www.ssstage.org.

Communicating Doors

★★★★

Silver Spring Stage