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Town Hall's 'Smokey Joe's Cafe is a delicious musical delight

By *Sophie Braccini*



Pictured in front, Jamail Davis; rear, from left, Glen Riggs, Jacqueline Dennis, Katrina McGraw, Elizabeth Curtis, Cadarius Mayberry, and Natalie Buster in "Smokey Joe's Café," through March 25, at Town Hall Theatre in Lafayette. Photo JayYamada

It seems that musicals are in the air...and this one is for our utmost delight. "Smokey Joe's Café," opened to a sold out audience on March 4 at Lafayette's Town Hall Theater.

□ The "play" presents a time of innocence, in the 1950s and early 60s when the American dream seemed to be within everyone's reach, and a whole generation was breaking free dancing to rock and roll beat. There is not one spoken word in Smokey Joe's Café, just songs, one after another, developing the timeless theme of the quest of love between men and women.

□ Four men and four women perform on stage. The play opens in a little town where they all used to live, heralded by the song "Neighborhood." They remember the time they had together. Then they will leave, they will love, betray, and get back together, with a breathless rhythm that captures the audience. It is not really a story, but it is more than a list of songs. Those are scenettes played, sung and danced by a super energetic and beautiful cast.

□ All the songs are from lyricist Jerry Leiber and composer Mike Stoller. Since 1952 and into the 60's, the amazingly productive duo wrote over 70 hit songs. The

musical show was put together as a tribute to an area and to the talent of both men in 1995. It ran for 2,036 performances, making it one of the longest-running musical revues in Broadway history.

□ Viewers will discover, or recollect songs, depending on their age. "Hound Dog," "Stand by Me," "Love Potion #9," "Yakety Yak," "Jailhouse Rock," "Spanish Harlem," "On Broadway," "Kansas City" and "Fools Fall in Love" are just a few.

□ Director Lauren Rosi thus took on an American icon of a musical when she agreed to direct "Smokey Joe's Café." The voice and acting talents had to be right to make it a success.

□ Rosi picked indeed probably some of the best vocal talents around.

□ There are some remarkable voices in this revue, and when not remarkable, they are excellent, making the production very homogenous. Spectators will get goosebumps at times. The beautiful "I'm a Woman" for example, sung by the four female singers separately and in unison, is perfection of execution.

□ Each of the singers is very distinct and brings their own voice color and style. Branden Thomas brings to the stage a voice with an amazing range. His very warm and nuanced register is enchanting. Katrina Lauren McGraw is such a polished singer, with a well-controlled voice that excels in both blues and rock-and-roll songs. Natalie Buster, with her deep voice, brings great seduction and even a bit of sultriness at times that adds to the general mood of the play. Elizabeth Curtis, Jamail Davis, Jacqueline Dennis, Cadarius Mayberry and Glen Riggs are all completely up to par, with a special mention for Davis whose dancing talent shines.

□ Another very nice element of the show is the live musicians: Elvis Ordiniza on saxophone, Scott Massoni on guitar, Matthew Porter on drums, and Peter Ruzsel on bass. They are all on stage, but behind the windows of Smokey Joe's Café, a very nice stage idea.

□ Only one small caveat, the stage is sometimes a bit restrictive for some of the dancing and lyricism of the musical revue.

□ Tickets and more information at www.townhalltheatre.com. The play will run until March 25.



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