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'War Bonds' closes theatre festival with nostalgic depiction of war



Tuesday, 27 June 2006

As the last show I was able to catch during The Stoneleaf Theatre Festival, I attended the cabaret "War Bonds" by EbzB Productions at North Carolina Stage Co.

The show was not so much a play, as it was a collection of letters back and forth from World War II soldiers and their families and songs from the era. The entire thing was arranged by the husband-and-wife team that founded EbzB, Serena Ehardt and David Zum Brunnen. The two also served as the performers for "War Bonds."

I thought that the idea for the show was solid. Combining the moving words of war veterans and their loved ones with classic songs like "Boogie-Woogie Bugle Boy" and "As Time Goes By," made for a most moving and entertaining piece of theater. The other members of the audience seemed to think so, too. The near packed house was constantly full of people either dabbing their eyes with handkerchiefs, or singing along with the numbers. They especially seemed to like when Ehardt would go out into the audience and sing with the crowd.

That was actually the point when I took issue with the show. The way it was arranged, both Ehardt and Zum Brunnen would read the letters and interviews with the soldiers and riveters, but when it came time to sing, Ehardt did all the numbers by herself. The only number this was not true in (with the exception of a few 'doo-wops' from Zum Brunnen) was "Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree..." and that was the one the audience seemed to respond to the most.

While I thought the show was a great way to remember a fascinating period in history, I thought that the format of it was too contrived and seemed too aimed at showcasing Ehardt's voice. She had a great voice, but it made Zum Brunnen look kind of silly to sit there onstage, watching her perform.

The sound also got on my nerves, to some extent. Both actors in "War Bonds" wore body-microphones that were tucked behind their ears. In case you haven't attended a show at N.C. Stage's theater, it is an intimate theater with fairly close quarters, in which the audience almost never has trouble hearing what the actors are saying.

Most songs from the World War II era are pieces that lend themselves well to a large, belting voice. Ehardt had the voice to sing those songs, but every time an opportunity presented itself to either belt or hit a high note, I could tell she was backing off for fear of getting feedback from the speakers or of blowing out the eardrums of the patrons. It kept her from showing off what she could really do and made her head-voice sound a little weak.

All of the songs in the production were played on a keyboard by Diane Petteway. Petteway played with such quality that it was difficult to discern between her accompanying and the way that everyone knows the real songs sounded. The dance numbers were also nicely arranged by musical director Julie A. Florin, though I wished that Zum Brunnen would have done more dancing with Ehardt, instead of her hopping about the stage on her own.

The costumes were fun, as well. Zum Brunnen stayed in traditional World War II military uniform and Ehardt transitioned from a period sequin dress and hat to the sort of outfit that a riveter would wear while at work.

Overall though, the show was an excellent depiction of the time period. It showed everything from Franklin Delano Roosevelt's immortal speeches made during his term as President of the United States, to women's experiences joining the workforce, to the soldiers' experiences in battle across the globe.

While at times it was a bit hokey, I thoroughly enjoyed the show and the rest of the audience seemed to think even more of it than I did. It was a fabulous and fun way to wrap up the Stoneleaf Festival for me. I can't wait until next year! I give it four of my six planets.

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