



THEATER REVIEW: 'Marvelous Wonderettes' cast puts own spin on classic pop songs

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Though there's never been a fully innocent time in human history, the bubbly wave of girl-group-driven pop songs from the '50s and '60s would argue differently: in harmony, with a backbeat.

Love in hearts and flowers stereotype, found in a kiss or a dream, pounding like a burning heart, all sprang from an imagined youthful exuberance that would -- through no fault of the Shangri La's, the Ronettes, the Shirelles or the Supremes -- give birth decades later to the Spice Girls. Then again, Chuck Berry and Wanda Jackson created not only the Beatles, but Fabian and Sting, unwittingly. Sometimes stories morph in translation.

But the effervescent bounce of "The Marvelous Wonderettes" flows from that sweeter time, in three-minute wonders by Brill Building songwriters like Carole King or Motown hit-makers like Smokey Robinson, articulated in breathless, yearning croons, through my-heart-will-burst clamor, suffering melodramatic melancholy when that boy turns out to be no d ... darn good.

So this shiny helium greeting card, Theatre Tuscaloosa's season-opening show, doesn't have much to say. So the songs have all been heard and done before. So what? Any oldie that's stayed this goldie has proven its staying power.

Director-choreographer Stacy Alley has had plenty of time to hone and perfect the material, also directing the University of Alabama's SummerTide run of the show, albeit with different actors, save Catherine Bradwell (Betty Jean), who was swing -- like an understudy, but for multiple characters -- for the Gulf Shores show. Her sure hand makes this one tick like a metronome, finding not only the musical but comic and, on occasion, somewhat dramatic, beats. It's sharp, silly, clean, and bright enough to shine through just about any gloom, seasonal, political, personal or not-rooting-for-the-Crimson-Tide-ical. Bradwell and her fellow Wonderettes -- Carli Hardon as Missy, Ally Bryant as Cindy Lou and Anna Lee Hawkins as Suzy -- are all undergrad musical theater majors at UA, so they're drawn from that deep talent pool.

The framework for the jukebox musical -- built around existing hits, rather than new music -- concerns four high school friends in 1958 Springfield (the non-state-specific one, ala "The Simpsons"), who've formed a group to entertain at the prom. There are minor struggles, love triangles and unrequited love -- subject matter of pretty much all the songs -- and characters quickly pop into type. Betty Jean's the boisterous clown; Missy's the earnest, semi-serious one, except when it comes to her crush; Suzy's the wide-eyed Baby Spice gum-popper; and Cyndi Lou's the manipulative Type A vixen. Their voices blend beautifully, their choreography, giddily goofy, stays spot-on for the eras, while effectively etched-out personas draw the laughs.

In the second act, the Wonderettes reunite 10 years later, with gleaming crinolined dresses swapped for mod A-line miniskirts and go-go boots, courtesy of costumer Jeanette Waterman. Though life weighs in, the melodies still land, seguing from "Lollipop" fluff to the bluesy defiance of "You Don't Own Me." The set by Andy Fitch is a clean, straightforward act, too, with a shimmering curtain backing the on-stage band, and Wheeler Kincaid's lights spotted with the same precision Alley lead this production.

Each of the cast gets moments to show off solo chops, such as Hardon's aching "Wedding Bell Blues," Hawkins' triumphant "Maybe I Know," Bradwell's complicated jump from "I Only Wanna Be With You" to "It's My Party," and Bryant's terrific triumvirate of "Son of a Preacher Man," "Leader of the Pack" and "Maybe."

But not even bikes spinning out on a deadman's curve can draw in darkness for long. Through squabbles and heartbreaks, the Wonderettes pull together in the end -- you kinda knew they would, but hey, let them have it -- to pound out triumphant group versions of "Rescue Me" and

"Respect." And unlike nearly every other cover of the Otis Redding song made legend by Aretha Franklin, this one both pays homage to and puts its own spin on the masterpiece. In the end, all four voices bolster, complement and join as one.