

TheRep, Albany, NY

Honky Tonk Angels, Book by Ted Swindley Music by Country's Greatest Song Writers

Directed and Choreographed by Gary John La Rosa.

Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman

“Will the Circle be Unbroken?”

Three women, each fleeing from her day-to-day life for different reasons meet on a bus to Nashville and form a bond that turns into a career choice: they will combine forces and become a singing trio named Honky Tonk Angels. They find work at a club called Honky Tonk Heaven and become a six-week sensation after which they break up and go their own ways again. That’s the plot of the country music revue, currently on stage at theRep in Albany, New York. It sounds slight, but it really is a show of substance and meaning. In fact, it may break your heart.



Erin Edelle, Elizabeth Nestlerode and Kara-Tameika Watkins; Photo: Doug Liebig

Twenty-nine songs later you’re exhausted but the three women on stage seem to be as fresh as a bouquet of daisies. Erin Edelle, Elizabeth Nestlerode and Kara-Tameika Watkins look terrific as they take their well-earned bows nearly two and a half hours after they started the show. They’ve changed costumes, wigs and makeup a dozen time, sung comic and tragic solos and group numbers, danced, run and roller skated around the stage. They have engaged audience members in song and dance (I know; I was one of them). They have impersonated Minnie Pearl, portrayed classic chanteuses, imitated their country music idols and given new meaning to songs

like “9 to 5,” “Stand By Your Man,” “Ode to Billy Joe,” “These Boots Were Made for Walking,” “I Will Always Love You,” “Harper Valley, PTA,” “Almost Persuaded,” and “I’ll Fly Away,” to name a few. The rest I’d never heard of before this show.

Elizabeth Nestlerode is Darlene, a dutiful daughter to an abusive father, who makes the break painfully but thankfully. She is a terrific balladeer right from the beginning of the show. As things progress she shows off her comic abilities with a sweet pride that defines her character. Her voice is the tenderest of the trio and it makes the most of songs like “Coal Miner’s Daughter” and “Fancy.” She also wears elegant clothing beautifully. Her Darlene is certainly a future star in the making.



Elizabeth Nestlerode; Photo: Doug Liebig

Sue Ellen is played by Kara-Tameika Watkins, a dark-skinned beauty with so much talent you want to grab her and shake her to see if some of it might rub off on you. Sue Ellen is a Los Angeles junior executive frustrated by the man’s world she exists in. She hates the men she has to cater to in order to get by in her world. But as a Honky Tonk Angel she can live on a totally different plane. She can be sassy, sweet or sorrowful and make it all her own and make it work. Watkins portrayal of “Cleopatra, Queen of Denial” is a high point of the show. She

struts the stage with all the glory of a Burlesque Diva, a Gypsy Rose Lee in gold lamé and a regal crown. Sue Ellen is sassy and secure and can quickly change into a comic parody and a movie waitress on skates and be anything her character wants to be without question or doubt.



Kara Tameika Watkins; Photo: Doug Liebig

Watkins has a very good voice and an excellent stage personality. She is pretty, graceful and an excellent clothes horse. As an “Angel” she is almost more angelic than anticipated when she shows sympathy and compassion. It is an exquisite performance.

The narrative voice in the show belongs to Angela, played by the wonderful Erin Edelle. Angela is wed to Bubba, has borne him six children and raised them on her own - apparently he is rarely ever home. She leaves them all behind to pursue her Nashville dreams. She also sings the comic songs, the sad ballads and the trios with gusto and elán. In this ensemble show with no stars she emerges as a definite winner in the star category. She can be funny, or tender at will and she can be smart and sexy at the same time while singing and dancing and gesturing with a rolling pin. That's talent.



Erin Edelle; Photo: Doug Liebig

The show's director/choreographer Gary John La Rosa has done a beautiful job coordinating the diverse talents of his trio along with the excellent design techniques exhibited by his team. His choreography isn't so much dance numbers as it is associated movement and it works very well indeed. His direction of the three women into their characters, sketchy at best, has made them believable and real. The set designs by Christopher Rhoton are perfect as are the costumes designed by Sera Bourgeau. Travis McHale's lighting design work is absolutely spot on and Jeffrey Salerno's sound design was just fine. Michael Dunn's wigs worked like a charm. Harry Lumb and Josh D. Smith created wonderful musical arrangements which the band, under the direction of Mark Galinovsky perfectly fitted the show.

It's a silly show, and it's a silly thing to say about it, but it's one of those shows you really don't want to miss. Not when the show is as entertaining and delightful as this one happens to be.

+ 07/25/2023 +

Honky Tonk Angels plays at theRep, located at 251 North Pearl Street, Albany, NY through August 20. For information and tickets call (518) 346-6204 or go to info@proctors.org.

