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Heart & Soul

Musical 'Love, Janis' captures the personality and spirit of the late rock icon Janis Joplin

By PAT CRAIG
Contra Costa Times

Cathy Richardson isn't Janis Joplin, but she comes hauntingly close to capturing the personality and spirit of the tortured Texas blues singer in "Love, Janis."

The show opened Sunday at San Francisco's Marines Memorial Theatre, arriving in the city where Joplin found fame in the mid-1960s after playing around the country for several years.

At this homecoming of sorts, the character of Joplin was greeted as an old friend by an audience containing a good representation of survivors of the Summer of Love, when Joplin and Big Brother and the Holding Co. exploded onto the local scene, giving Aquarians an earth-shaking version of the blues, as it should be done.

Writer Randal Myler based much of the musical story on the book "Love, Janis," which itself was based on the singer's letters home, along with print and electronic interviews with Joplin.

Myler and musical director Sam Andrew, an original Big Brother member who performed with the singer for much of her tragically brief career, got it right.

The show features recollections of Joplin interspersed with 16 of the singer's most familiar tunes.

And while that sounds like the ingredients for just another jukebox musical from the rock era, "Love, Janis" towers above the rest.

To begin with, Myler realized the show had to be about both the songs and the music.

By partnering with Andrew, he was able to give the show an authentic feel, with a musical sensibility that reflects the period as well as Joplin's unique onstage character, which, as it turns out, came to haunt the young woman.

Next, Myler realized it would be nearly impossible to find someone who could be Joplin onstage.

The girl from Port Arthur was just too complex, both physically and psychologically, to duplicate.

Instead, two women were cast in the Joplin role -- Richardson (who plays the singing Joplin on alternate nights with Katrina Chester) performs as the public Janis, and Morgan Hallett plays the nonsinging private Janis.

This might, at first, seem a little clunky with two people playing the same role, often onstage at the same time.

But as it turns out, the drinking, drugging and partying Joplin is worlds away from the dutiful daughter who writes to her family, loves her new clothes and pet dog and cat, feels guilty about perceived slights to her parents, and feels the ambivalence about the social changes going on in the mid-'60s.

And it is the richness of this character that creates an emotional connection with the audience that goes well beyond the astonishingly well-performed music.

The private Janis, expressing almost constant guilt over her relationship with her family, invites them to San Francisco, shyly, but proudly, confessing that she has made something of herself.

She answers her mother's complaint about her screaming and shouting so much by explaining she's saving her nice voice in case she plays Las Vegas.

Meanwhile, the public Janis is becoming a superstar, throwing the girl's life out of control

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and playing into her fondness for the wild life with its unlimited opportunity for booze and drugs.

It was something that couldn't last -- she arrived in San Francisco at age 23 in 1966. She was dead before the end of 1970, of a heroin overdose.

But in those short four years, Joplin became a legend, with a voice that still tears at your soul.

Richardson goes a long way to re-create this with some astounding replications of the singer's work.

There are times when you can close your eyes and swear you are listening to the real thing. And when you open your eyes and watch Richardson, you'd swear you were watching Joplin.

Richardson has managed to blend the raw sexuality of Joplin with her intense exuberance for performing.

Joplin was genuinely sexy onstage, but what came through just as much, if not more, was the sheer joy she got from performing, from being the center of attention.

Joplin was the girl who was never pretty enough, never popular enough, never pleasing enough, finally towering in the center ring. And it is a joy to watch all this once again through Richardson's interpretation.

It is a difficult thing to re-create, particularly because both Richardson and Hallett are considerably more physically attractive than Joplin was.

But the show's not out to create a carbon copy, but to re-create the feeling of a specific time -- and "Love, Janis" succeeds beautifully there.

STAGE REVIEW • What: "Love, Janis," by Randal Myler • Where: Marines Memorial Theatre, 609 Sutter St., San Francisco • When: 8 p.m. Tuesdays through Fridays, 5 and 9 p.m. Saturdays and 3 and 7 p.m. Sundays, through Sept. 3 • Tickets: \$35-\$67, available by calling (415) 771-6900 or online at www.ticketmaster.com • Running time: 2 hours • Information: (415) 771-6900 or online at www.marinesmemorialtheatre.com

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