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Theater review: In rocking 'Memphis,' the good times roll

Aurora, Outfit give a rollicking take on Tony Award winner.

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By Bert Osborne - For the **AJC**

Fans of musical theater should be counting their blessings this summer. Joining a figurative chorus of other current shows that also includes True Colors' "Chasin' Dem Blues," Actor's Express' "Rent" and Serenbe's "Evita" is the regional premiere of "Memphis," winner of the 2010 Tony Award for best musical.

The rollicking co-production between Aurora Theatre (where it runs through August) and Theatrical Outfit (which will remount it in September) is expertly staged by the Outfit's Tom Key and music-directed by Aurora's Ann-Carol Pence (leading a slick eight-member band). The show pulls out all the stops in terms of its vibrant and polished musical numbers, performed to a tee by a large ensemble of singers and dancers (choreographed by Ballethnic's Waverly Lucas).

While they share some similar thematic territory about the crossing over of "race records" from black audiences to white, unlike "Blues," a revue of standard period tunes with no real plot to speak of, "Memphis" contains a peppy score of two dozen original songs (music by David Bryan, lyrics by Bryan and Joe DiPietro) and a more traditional storyline and characters (scripted by DiPietro).

Set in the segregated 1950s and eventually focusing on an interracial romance and business partnership between a cocky white radio DJ and the comely black singer he discovers, it's hardly groundbreaking — part "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner" and part "A Star Is Born," essentially, and not nearly as adventurous as a "Rent" or an "Evita," either musically or dramatically.

Even so, by virtue of the likelihood that as many people have seen those two shows before as haven't already seen this one, there's a certain freshness to "Memphis" that's most welcome and downright disarming.

Nowhere does that manifest itself as purely as it does in the sensational performance of Travis Smith, who simultaneously anchors and buoys the production as Huey Calhoun, the wholly endearing "redneck" who defiantly rebels against the outdated social conventions of the day. In numbers like "Radio" and "Tear Down the House," he's an unmistakably qualified vocalist, but it's as such a gifted actor that Smith ultimately embodies the true heart and soul of the piece.

Naima Carter Russell co-stars as Felicia Farrell, his unlikely protege and love interest. Although she nails her big solos, too ("Someday," "Love Will Stand When All Else Falls"), her characterization comes across as slightly more aloof and less personable than Smith's.

As Huey's disapproving mother and Felicia's disapproving brother, the splendid Megan McFarland and the earnest Cecil Washington Jr. head a supporting cast that features Eric Moore, Matt Lewis, Eugene H. Russell IV and William S. Murphey as well.

Among Key's outstanding design team: Shannon Robert (set), Andre Allen (lights), Shilla Benning (costumes) and Daniel Terry (sound), who's also credited as technical director (in a few segments, a live video feed simulates Huey's "American Bandstand"-style TV show).

Given the abundance of talent involved, it isn't very surprising that "Memphis" is as entertaining as it is. Thanks primarily to its ingratiating leading man, that it's so thoughtful and heartfelt is an unexpectedly resounding fringe benefit.

THEATER REVIEW

"Memphis"

Grade: A-

Through Aug. 30. 8 p.m. Wednesdays-Saturdays; 2:30 p.m. Saturdays-Sundays; 10 a.m. Wednesdays (Aug. 12 and 19 only). \$20-\$65. Aurora Theatre, 128 E. Pike St., Lawrenceville. 678-226-6222, www.auroratheatre.com.

For the Theatrical Outfit's run of the show:

Sept. 10-20. 7:30 p.m. Wednesdays-Saturdays; 2:30 p.m. Saturdays-Sundays. \$20-\$50. Rialto Center for the Arts, 80 Forsyth St. N.W., Atlanta. 678-528-1500, www.theatricaloutfit.org.

Bottom line: The music rocks — and so does actor Travis Smith.