

'Beautiful' at the Beck Center is a Worthy Trip Through Carole King's Musical Prowess

While it leaves the audience waiting for the full King experience until late in the play, the build-up provides a look into her life's tapestry

By Christine Howey on Wed, Jul 17, 2024 at 7:25 am



Photo by Steve Wagner

Beautiful, through August 11 at the Beck Center

When telling the story of a famous person in a play, such as the singer Carole King (née Carole Klein) in the show *Beautiful*, there is an irresistible temptation to spin it out chronologically. After all, that approach is certainly understandable, and it allows the audience to be amazed at the often-humble beginnings of such a stellar talent.

That is how this "Carole King Musical" is structured by book writer Douglas McGrath, and it almost strangles the good parts of this production at the Beck Center. As you may know, Carole spent her early professional years churning out rock hits in the '50s at NYC's renowned Brill Building for The Shirelles, The Drifters, Little Eva and other stars back when discs spun at an easy-going 45-rpm.

Aside from a flash-forward in the long first act, we don't even hear Carole—in the talented person of Elsie Carlisle—sing in that mature voice that she found almost by accident, the one that turned her 1971 album "Tapestry" into pure gold.

Instead, we listen as young Carole pounds out the melodies and lyrics to tunes such as "Who Put the Bomp" and "The Locomotion." Then we hear many of those songs sung by actors impersonating those groups and individuals, with varying degrees of success.

It's asking a lot for a local theater to find performers who can deliver while singing in

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the style of luminaries such as The Righteous Brothers. And when they fall short, it makes the play feel longer than it should as we wait for the CK payoff.

But this play puts the audience in a time-based hammerlock as we wait to hear King croon. And when she finally appears, in the last half hour enacting a bit of Carole's Carnegie Hall appearance, Carlisle delivers the goods. Even though she doesn't quite have the warm, throaty sound of the original, she hits many of the high points among King's monster hits such as "You Make Me Feel Like a Natural Woman," "It's Too Late" and "I Feel the Earth Move."

The early part of this musical is held up by performers in supporting roles who keep the creaky gears of the show moving. Primary among them are Reese Henrick and Jordan Potter who play the frenemy song writing team of Cynthis Weil and Barry Mann, who coax big laughs out of some fairly predictable, sit-com material.

As the music mogul Don Kirchner, a man who apparently never heard a new song he didn't love, Chris Richards displays Olympic-level comic timing as he wrangles his new rock music writers. And Genie Klein gets a couple chuckles with her portrayal of Carole's stereotypical Jewish mother.



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In the role of Carole's lover, lyricist and husband Gerry Goffin, Mikhail Roberts manages to craft an ambitious character tormented by his own demons without tipping the show out of balance.

Director Scott Spence keeps the pace moving, thanks in part to Cheri Prough Devol's slick two-level set with sliding doors that keeps multiple singers and groups appearing and disappearing with admirable seamlessness.

Carole King's story is one of a gentle, modest woman who happened to have an enormous ability to write and sing songs that touch people. While it would be nice to have a play that explored that part of her story more, this Beautiful is worth the 150-minute journey.

Beautiful

Through August 11 at the Beck Center, 17801 Detroit Ave., Lakewood, beckcenter.org, 216-521-2540.

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