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FEATURED

Theater review: 'Joe Schmoe Saves the World'

'Joe Schmoe Saves the World' worth attending

By Connie Shakalis H-T Reviewer 7 hrs ago

For decades, I've bemoaned the technological trend of substituting special effects for acting and directing talent.

So many films and plays strutting their bangs, screeches and light shows, but lacking character development and plot. "Joe Schmoe Saves the World," IU Summer Theatre's final production for 2017, struts neither copious costumes (the actors wear their own clothes), nor cascading fireworks. The fireworks are in the story, songs, acting and direction. Correction — one special effect, Rueben Lucas' continuous video projection on the upstage wall, is splendid. I can't see the play being done without it.

The play opens on this wall, as we — and Gloria (Mary Beth Black) — watch 26-year-old Neda Agha-Soltan die in a Tehran street after being mistakenly shot by police. Neda's death was captured by amateur photographers that June day in 2009 and made its way to the internet. She had not participated in the protest (believing Iran's recent election had been rigged, protesters gathered in Azadi Square) but had just been getting out of her car with her singing teacher to escape the heat. Neda became a symbol of Iran's struggle for freedom, human rights and women's empowerment.

A fitting theme, as both women leads in "Joe Schmoe" search for ways to fix their worlds' injustices. The play is two stories developing simultaneously, in parallel. An American couple, Gloria and Joe, are indie musicians trying to land a contract with a major recording company. For years, Gloria has been writing lyrics for their band, Joe Schmoe Saves the World, but is losing interest in creating and performing the band's raunchy songs. As she studies the dissent in Iran, she becomes enamored with writing lyrics that are political and pithy.

Black's voice is lovely, and her songs were my favorites.

Scott Van Wye is thoroughly Joe Schmoe. What casting. He gyrates, he rages, he pleads and he wants fame more than anything. Almost anything. He's a recovering alcoholic and has "been dying for a drink for weeks."

The Iranian couple is played by Meadow Nguy and Aaron Ricciardi. Although another strong female, Afarin (Nguy) seems in stark contrast to Gloria — at first. She has grown up in an oppressed society restricted by curfews and dress codes. Accustomed to truncated freedoms, she is angry and energetic, eager to spray paint her messages calling for society reformation for all of Tehran to see. Lyon, preferring to lie low, urges her to "stop acting like a whore" (she removed her legally required hijab) and conform. Later, he sings with Gloria "I just wanna dance. I don't want to feel. I don't want to fight."

Nguy's Afarin, questioning and resistant, is compelling. Her face tells it all, but Nguy is a dancer and can't help also charming us with her body language and, albeit brief, dancing. At one point, the had-enough-of-politics-already Lyon throws her to the floor; she is undiluted grace.

Ricciardi told the audience after the show that he had once played a gay Hitler. I'll bet he was good. His Lyon is wacky and sensitive with just the right dose of nerd. Such fun to watch. Lyon knows who he is and admits to Afarin, "I know I always run. ... always hide."

Joe and Gloria's band includes real-life musicians in a corner of the stage. The keyboardist, Richard Baskin Jr., is also the play's music director. There are drums, guitar, bass and four backup singers, who sound like a chorus of 20, with their harmonies and vocal precision. The band and vocalists are a highlight. Every time the fabulous four sang, I couldn't help noticing Danielle McKnight. She is a freshman in IU's BFA musical theatre program and, I predict, will soar.

L.A.'s Brett Ryback wrote the book, music and lyrics. He is also the 2016 recipient of the ASCAP Foundation's Cole Porter Award. Direction is by Christian Barillas, also based in L.A.

I haven't stopped thinking about the Arab Spring, Iran, Neda and IU Summer Theatre since I saw "Joe Schmoe Saves the World" last night. I think that's what theater is supposed to do.

If you go

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WHAT: "Joe Schmoe Saves the World"

WHO: IU Summer Theatre

WHERE: Wells-Metz Theatre

WHEN: 7:30 p.m. today and Saturday