



'Spotlight on the USO'

By [Southern Oregon Jazz Orchestra shines at Camelot](#)

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for Revels

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In this election year 2012, Camelot Theatre presents a season of plays that define the American experience. Its first show — a sort of a preview of the theme — is "Spotlight on the USO."

The name "USO" conjures up grainy film images of celebrities performing on makeshift stages before large audiences of American servicemen based overseas, from the South Pacific and Korea to Vietnam and Iraq. The music usually evoked is the big-band sound of the '40s.

True to those memories, Camelot's musical spotlight features the Southern Oregon Jazz Orchestra, a 15-member band playing lots of lush brass with a cool double bass (Rand Mace), great drummer (Dave Hegdahl) and nimble keyboardist (Alan Berman), who also delivers smooth jazz vocals. They are joined onstage by talented vocalist Dianne Strong and veteran actress Shirley Patton as narrator.

The script of Camelot stalwart Peter Wickliffe traces the United Service Organizations from its 1941 beginning to the still-active present day. The fast-paced production is directed by Presila Quinby.

Set designer Dan Zastoupil sets the mood with an old, upright radio and little else. Video designer Brian O'Connor effectively uses a slide projector to establish time and place. World War II brings slides of soldiers watching "camp shows," dancing at canteens and taking smiling photos with the celebrity entertainers. As the music moves from era to era (including "Rock Around the Clock"), the vintage of the images shifts, as well.

Musical numbers range from morale-builders such as "White Cliffs of Dover," "American Patrol" and "In the Mood" to misty, romantic ballads such as "Come Rain or Come Shine," "I Remember You" and "I'll Be Seeing You." There are upbeat songs such as "You Make Me Feel So Young," "Nice Work if You Can Get It," "I'm Sitting on Top of the World" and "Give Me the Simple Life." Scattered throughout are jazz stalwarts such as "Sing, Sing, Sing," "Tuxedo Junction," "Minnie the Moocher" and "Is You Is or Is You Ain't My Baby."

The Southern Oregon Jazz Orchestra is an interesting mix of veteran and younger musicians. Somehow, each member gets his or her own riff in the various numbers, and they all shine. These are virtuosos who have regular musical gigs throughout the Rogue Valley. They all look like they are having a wonderful time showcasing music that they obviously love.

Ellen Alphonso is the consultant responsible for Patton's period dress, glamour outfit and wigs and Strong's effective stage costumes. I loved the porkpie hats and black jazz attire of the band.

The production ends with a rousing rendition of the "Armed Forces Medley," and veterans from each branch of the service are

asked to stand for applause. It is a lovely, throat-catching moment.

"Spotlight on the USO" is an enjoyable trip down memory lane with some very talented guides. It plays at Camelot through Sunday, Jan. 22. See www.camelottheatre.org or call 541-535-5250 for showtimes and tickets.

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