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Camelot gives warm nod to '70s feminism

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Hannah Gassoway, Julianna Wheeler and Livia Genise appear in Camelot Theatre's production of "I'm Getting My Act Together and Taking It on the Road."

Photo by Steve Sutfin

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By Angela Decker
for the Mail Tribune

In the 1970s, cabaret writer Gretchen Cryer, a 33-year-old divorced mother of two, used her personal experiences as the foundation for "I'm Getting My Act Together and Taking It on the Road," a thought-provoking and humorous musical about the role of women in contemporary society.

The original 1978 production, with music by Nancy Ford, met some critical opposition after it opened in New York. Audiences, however, loved it, as it seemed to tap into the feminist energy of the time. Now, more than 33 years since its debut, the play still raises relevant questions about gender roles and identity struggles.

The Camelot Theater's production of "I'm Getting My Act Together and Taking It on the Road" is both thoughtful and entertaining, giving a warm nod to the 1970s and its vibrant women's movement, while highlighting problems that modern women and men still encounter in relationships.

Heather Jones, played by Camelot's Artistic Director Livia Genise, is a 39-year-old singer debuting her new nightclub act for her manager, Joe Epstein, played by Bob Jackson Miner.

For Heather, the new act presents a more honest portrayal of herself. Joe, however, doesn't care for the new Heather and insists she return to the more whitewashed and consistently lucrative persona that she previously embodied.

Heather won't be suppressed, and between songs and performances with a small band and two lively back-up singers, she and Joe argue and commiserate about relationships, aging and gender roles.

Genise embodies the energy and occasional confusion of a newly liberated woman in the '70s without being too preachy or strident. It would be easy for the entire play to be preachy, and one scene in the first act does threaten to do so, but director Roy Raines, Genise, Miner and the strong supporting actors do not let that happen. Instead, the Camelot's production balances humor and a genuine exploration of the pain men and women so often cause one another.

Miner is especially endearing as Joe, the gruff manager who doesn't understand Heather's desire to break free of her pre-feminist patterns. While Miner's character strongly resists her's change and the larger social changes around him, he is not a bully. His character could have been a stereotypical pig-headed, money-hungry manager, but Miner plays Joe as a flawed but caring friend. He shows sincere concern for Heather and reflects on his own damaged marriage and his role in it. Miner is funny, frustratingly clueless and heartbreaking at various moments in the play.

The onstage band is super talented, providing a visual and musical pulse to the entire show. Guitarist Jeremy Johnson is particularly charming as Lee, the much younger musician with a crush on Heather.

Hannah Gassaway and Juliana Wheeler are energetic and playful as they lend vocal and emotional support to Genise's newly liberated Heather.

Details in costume and lighting evoke the '70s without beating the audience over the head. Wide lapels, polyester and touches of fringe and paisley are enough to give the audience a sense of time. The lighting moves subtly from muted blues, gold and earthy tones of peach and green.

"I'm Getting My Act Together" is a musical in the sense that the characters sing and the songs help move the story along.

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Some of the songs are very good, particularly "Natural High," "Dear Tom" and "Happy Birthday." In general, though, the melodies are forgettable. Audience members might not leave the theater with a catchy tune stuck in their heads, but will definitely remember the emotion expressed in the lyrics.

More importantly, they will leave thinking more deeply about their own romantic relationships and the gender roles they play out.

The show is at 8 p.m. Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays, and 2 p.m. Sundays through Nov. 6. Tickets are \$23, \$21 for students and seniors. For information, call the box office at 541-535-5250 or see www.camelottheatre.org. Camelot Theatre is located at 101 Talent Ave., Talent.

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