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Review: 'Ethel Merman's Broadway' is a wow

LAWRENCE B. JOHNSON
Special to The Detroit News

Broadway legend Ethel Merman was famous for a voice that could peel paint off the back wall of a large theater. But she was also an appealing, naturally gifted singer and a consummate entertainer.

Those qualities kept Merman's star shining on Broadway through four decades -- from 1930, when her red-hot rendition of "I Got Rhythm" stole the show from top-billed Ginger Rogers in George Gershwin's "Girl Crazy," to her triumphant swan song in 1970 in the title role of Jerry Herman's "Hello, Dolly."

And everything that was irresistible about her is rebundled and revived in Rita McKenzie's one-woman show "Ethel Merman's Broadway," which opened an extended run Thursday night at the Gem Theatre.

McKenzie, who looks and sounds remarkably like Merman, portrays the grand dame's career in a bountiful evening of medleys and reminiscences. Plus a certain amount of fantasy, like the telephone conversation with Irving Berlin in which she throws the stymied composer a slew of hints that would magically blossom in the lyrics of "Annie Get Your Gun."

What makes McKenzie's show so engaging is the persona she develops, the character, the woman she paints. She recalls a real life of glitter muted by disappointments, how the huge stage persona proved to be too much for the Hollywood camera, the mid-career withdrawal to motherhood and how that didn't work out - the four marriages, none of which lasted.

But mainly, it's about the music. Backed by a high-powered band that shares the stage, McKenzie belts her way through Merman hits from that crackling "I Got Rhythm" to a bubbly "I Get a Kick Out of You" and a larger-than-life Act 1 finale: "There's No Business Like Show Business."

For her bright turn through "Alexander's Ragtime Band," McKenzie descends from the stage into the audience, a capacity house that knew Merman and her songs and readily joined in occasionally as chorus.

If there's a highlight, it's two classic numbers from "Gypsy," which lyricist Stephen Sondheim and composer Julie Styne wrote for Merman in 1959. McKenzie nailed the exasperation and urgency of "Some People," Mama Rose's declaration of independence from a humdrum life.

Her exuberant delivery of "Everything's Coming Up Roses" capped the show, but would have stopped it at any point.

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Additional Facts

'Ethel Merman's Broadway'

Rita McKenzie

Grade: A-

Gem Theatre

333 Madison Ave., Detroit

Through Nov. 22

Tickets: \$39.50

Call (313) 963-9800
www.GemTheatre.com

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