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Dive Back Into the Groovin' 60's With Buoyant *Shout!*

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The Julia Miles Theater

Coming on the heels of disappointing revues of John Denver and Johnny Cash's songs, and musicals created from the songbooks of John Lennon and Elvis Presley, *Shout! The Mod Musical*, which opened at the Julia Miles Theatre on 55th Street last night, might be met with some skepticism from theatergoers. Any doubts that audiences might have about this new piece, with the tag line "What is the soundtrack of your life?," should be dismissed though. "Shout!" succeeds beautifully. It's **an infectiously joyful and gleeful tour** of some 30 songs made popular by the likes of Petula Clark, Dusty Springfield and Lulu.

The show, featuring a quintet of winning and talented actress/singers, has been created by Phillip George and David Lowenstein. In "Shout!", the performers play not specific characters, but rather composites of types from the period. There's a slutty girl, an overly gregarious girl, a homebody, a nerd, and an elegant girl. To further delineate these types, and to set the show's framing device in motion, each type is given a specific color (carried through in Philip Heckman's attractive and simultaneously witty period costumes) by the assured male voice (un-credited) of these young women's favorite magazine, also "Shout!"

Another voice is featured in the piece, that of Gwendolyn Holmes, the magazine's advice columnist (the always delightful Carole Shelley), a woman decidedly of the old school, who believes that most problems can be solved by a new hairdo or a pedicure. As the years roll by (the show spans 1962 to 1970), the young women write into the magazine asking for advice, and thus, "Shout!" becomes not only an homage to the music of the decade, but an interesting portrait of the changes in these women and society's attitude toward them. (On the cover page of the program, Peter Charles Morris and co-creator George are credited with these "Mod Musings and Groovy Gab" which also includes the shows random one-liners that sometimes come between numbers, reminding theatergoers of "Laugh-In.")

As good as the material around the music is, the songs themselves are what audiences will come in expecting to be transported by and here, the performers don't disappoint – each displays a terrific understanding of the material and the period styles. (Tony Medla's sound design must also be credited – it appropriately amplifies the performers but never becomes intrusive.)

Erin Crosby (playing the brash American in the group) delivers the most rock 'n' roll centric of the numbers, including the gospel infused "Son of a Preacher Man." Denise Summerford discovers the powerful emotional arc of "To Sir With Love" and proves that she is a gifted physical comedian as she listens to the potential side-effects of a new drug on the market – "The Pill." As the show draws to a close, Summerford also leads in a particularly rousing "Those Were the Days."

Erica Schroeder, sporting the mini-est of the minis as the group's slut, brings a sultry flair to all of her numbers, but what theatergoers will remember most is her deft combination of sensuality and humor while singing "Goldfinger." Here George and choreographer David Lowenstein manage to be faithful to the spirit of the John Barry, Anthony Newley and Leslie Bricusse tune, even as they spoof the Bond franchise for which it was created.

As the "domestic" member of the group, Julie Dingman Evans is given the most concrete storyline in "Shout!" - and during the course of the show, theatergoers experience the character's engagement, marriage, alcoholism, and finally, her divorce. This plot lends weight to songs like "You Don't Have to Say You Love Me" and Evans uses the character's story to fuel her spot-on delivery of not only this, but all of her numbers.

Playing the vainly elegant girl (who unfortunately happens to be the show's most under-conceived type) is Marie-France Arcilla, who manages to transcend the sometimes schizophrenic composite which she's been given, delivering her tunes with a wonderfully smoky and surprisingly powerful voice.

David Gallo's shag-carpeted, tiered set with a backdrop of shiny stylized plastic flowers and hanging beads provides the perfect environment for the show and its songs. Lighting designer Jason Lyons uses a palate of period colors that run the gamut of strawberry pink-red to lemon yellow.

These production elements combine with the music and performances create an experience that, ultimately, is a late summertime treat that one suspects will be running well into the fall and winter.

Shout! The Mod Musical plays at the Julia Miles Theatre (420 West 55th Street). Performances are Tuesdays at 7pm; Wednesday through Saturday at 8pm and Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday at 3pm. Tickets are \$55.00 and can be purchased by calling 212-239-6200. Further information is available online at www.ShoutTheModMusical.com.

-- *Andy Propst*