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'Shout!' shines at Harrah's

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By Chuck Darrow

Last week, we took to task the Tropicana's current production show, Jukebox Live starring Adrian Zmed, for its tired concept. Well, as the guys from Monty Python would have put it: Now for something completely different.

That's as good as any way to describe Shout! The Mod Musical, which runs through April 22 at Harrah's Atlantic City. Engaging, entertaining and quirky as all get out, Shout! is a breath of fresh air wafting through the stale casino production show scene.

Ostensibly, the Off-Broadway revue is just another pop-music survey, albeit one with a relatively narrow focus: 1960s hits by (mostly British) female artists including Dusty Springfield and Petula Clark. But there is so much more going on in this snappy little production that the result is anything but the same-old, same-old.

While not a true book musical, Shout! does have a storyline of sorts. Five young women (four Brits and an American) with distinctly different personalities go through major life changes as the 1960s unfold. Their collective anchor is "Shout!" a fictional English celebrity-and-lifestyle magazine of the era.

From its pages (via the voices of disembodied advice columnists), the five characters, identified only by the colors of their wardrobe (e.g. "Yellow Girl") receive advice on such topics as dating, sex and fashion.

It is this device that sets Shout! apart from the casino revue pack. First, the segments in which the women seek advice are comical. Many of the laughs come from the cast's pantomime shtick as they react to the advice.

But there is something a lot deeper going on. The theme of Shout! is nothing less than the cultural and sociological sea changes that took place as a result of the feminist movement. Subjects heretofore not broached in casino presentations, such as sexuality and recreational drug use, are addressed, although such topics are played strictly for laughs (the pot-smoking segment, in particular, is a hoot).

The theme of female empowerment is driven home by the score, which emphasizes the tough, independent attitudes that women of the era were adopting. While Juke Box Live includes the yearning Connie Francis ballad, "Where the Boys Are," Shout! features the feminist anthem, "These Boots Are Made for Walking."

The five cast members are all top-notch singers, dancers and comedic performers, but it's Holly Burton (as the American "Yellow Girl") who stands out, thanks mostly to her powerhouse reading of Lulu's 1967 hit, "To Sir, With Love." The music is provided by a three-piece, onstage band that impressively illustrates how far keyboard technology has come in its ability to recreate the sound of virtually any instrument.

Shout! The Mod Musical -- which probably isn't suitable for the pre-teen set -- isn't without its faults. The absence of male voices creates occasionally shrill moments in the ensemble numbers. And there are some chronological inaccuracies (Mary Hopkins' 1968 single, "Those Were the Days," is introduced in the 1970s segment).

And, of course, it's puzzling as to why a production that primarily celebrates British women took its title from a song by a group of American males (Joey Dee & The Starlites). But that's just nit picking.

Shout! The Mod Musical is a sassy, saucy and immensely satisfying way to spend 80 minutes away from the slot machines and gaming tables. Or, to put it in the vernacular of the era, it's simply smashing.

Show times are 9 p.m. Friday and Saturday and 8 p.m. Sunday through Thursday. Admission is \$25. Call (800) 242-7724 or visit www.harrahs.com

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