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Musical tribute to the '60s is a knockout

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NEW YORK, July 28 (UPI) – “Shout! The Mod Musical,” a tribute to the swinging '60s that was a London hit five years ago, has been brilliantly recreated with an American cast for an Off-Broadway production that just might become the sleeper hit of the season, worthy of transfer to Broadway.

Co-created by Philip George and David Lowenstein for the tiny Duplex theater in New York in 2000 and then transferred to London, “Shout!” has George as director and Lowenstein as choreographer in its fresh incarnation at the Julia Miles Theater. The physical production designed by David Gallo, who won a 2006 Tony Award for “The Drowsy Chaperone,” looks like a million dollars and could be transferred to a small Broadway theater without any upscaling.

The setting is that of London magazine for modern women where five hip young women are coming of age on the editorial staff, perusing articles on the latest fashion and lifestyle fads and writing letters to its advice columnist, Gwendolyn Holmes (veteran actress Carole Shelley in voice-over), who believes there is no better career than being a wife and mother.

They spurn Dear Gwen’s counsel, which seems to have little to do with the realities of their lives – homosexual and abusive husbands, lesbian tendencies, experiments with marijuana, the lure of The Pill, and the necessities of staying as thin as Twiggy and ageless, too, if they want to keep their jobs. All this in an era when Ecstasy was a skin cream!

In answer to a question posed by one of the magazine’s articles, “What color of the mod rainbow are you?,” each woman is identified by her monochromatic minidress designed by Philip Heckman in an obvious homage to Carnaby Street fashion, Mary Quant in particular.

Marie-France Arcilla plays the glamourpuss Blue Girl, Denise Summerford is the pudgy awkward Georgy Girl in red, Erin Crosby is the crass American Yellow Girl, nuts about the Beatles, Julie Dingman Evans is the pretty but prim blonde in orange, and Erica Schroeder is the slutty bombshell in green who, wouldn’t you know, gets to play the bride at the end of a mock runway fashion show.

All of these Dynel-wigged actresses are well stacked, of more or less the same height, and have agreeable, high-energy voices and a snappy way of moving about the stage in their vinyl boots to Lowenstein’s groovy choreography. All but Crosby attempt an English accent, with varying success, but that’s only a minor quibble compared to the lack of dialogue in the show, allowing little room for wit beyond a few one-line gags.

The cast is pretty much limited to singing a catalog of 1960s songs ranging from Petula Clark, Shirley Bassey, Dusty Springfield, and LuLu hits to ballads by Burt Bacharach and a James Bond movie theme song, “Goldfinger.”

It's a nostalgic selection of juke box offerings, but this is actually not a juke box musical because the score is not by one composer-performer or a single performing group as is "Mama Mia!" and "Jersey Boys," currently on Broadway, and the recent "Lennon" and "Ring of Fire."

Some of the memorable numbers are "Don't Sleep in the Subway," "Son of a Preacher Man," a Springfield sensation, "To Sir With Love," "Diamonds are Forever," sung sensuously by Arcilla with finger cymbal accents, "I Couldn't Live Without Your Love," "I Just Don't Know What TO Do With Myself," and the finale anthem, "Downtown," which has the audience singing along.

The stage, abloom with five-petaled plastic flowers of Andy Warhol pop art inspiration, is hung with swishy purple-beaded Casbah curtains glinting in the Day-Glo lighting designed by Jason Lyons. The only stage furnishings are a curving embankment of stairs and a scanting arrangement upholstered in hot pink shag carpet and a lovely ceiling arrangement of Isamu Noguchi light sculpture hanging lamps.

The on-stage musicians, barely visible to the audience, are conductors-keyboardist Bradley Vieth, a second keyboardist, Christopher Stephens, and percussionist Joe Brady. They do a terrific job articulating the songs along with the singers in a show that starts somewhat confusingly but begins to build quickly in pace and excitement that has nothing to do with nostalgia but everything to do with showmanship.

As this musical revue ends, the women face the 1970s by exchanging their minidresses for fashion jeans and fringe leather jackets. A decade has gone by in a short 90 minutes that are almost totally delightful. This is a show to see and a show to watch as its popularity builds with the public.

Somewhere in the smattering of dialogue there just happens to be a mention of the Helen Hayes Theater, an intimate Broadway venue that would be perfect for "Shout!"