

Show about jazz and blues great does indeed cook

Music sung with heart makes Cookin' at the Cookery a fitting tribute to singer Alberta Hunter

Peter Birnie, The Vancouver Sun

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Oh yes, it's cookin'. Cookin' at the Cookery is also jumpin', jivin', smokin' and sparkin'.

The Arts Club launches its 43rd season with a show so snappy that even its title, which distracts from an offering that actually has nothing to do with food, can't get in the way of a tasty tribute to jazz and blues great Alberta Hunter.

Well into her eighties when she took to the stage at The Cookery club in Greenwich Village, Hunter had a lovely gruffness in her voice at the end of a long career. Toronto actress Jackie Richardson captures that quality beautifully in a show-closing performance of The Love I Have for You (written by Hunter herself) that's filled with heart; the big singer from Toronto has already won our hearts with equally rich renderings of Hunter hits from across the 20th century.

Richardson works with Janice Lorraine in a tag-team pair of performances. Physically they're as different as chalk and cheese, with Lorraine's wiry frame perfectly suited to not only portraying Alberta as a happy child who couldn't quit singing Jesus Loves Me but easily stepping into the shoes of some of the men Hunter worked with.

At one point early in her career, Hunter wondered why her audience was acting so oddly. "You're stoppin' the show!" she was told, not understanding that the ability to bring an audience to its feet was a good thing. Cookin' at the Cookery has at least one such show-stopping moment, when sweet Lorraine morphs into a Louis Armstrong so thoroughly thought out that every swipe at sweat with a hanky seems to come from Satchmo himself.

Cookin' at the Cookery is filled with similarly sharp observances of Hunter and her fascinating life. Writer-director (and choreographer) Marion J. Caffey chooses to eschew the thin format of a musical revue by giving the story some structure, but keeps it so simple that this is largely just a gentle tribute that's very much drawn from Hunter's own perspective. Despite references to systemic racism and the death of her mother, there are no dark corners lurking.

Tickling the ivories of an upright piano, Bill Sample leads a terrific jazz-and-blues quartet: Graham Boyle on drums, David Sinclair on guitar and Rene Worst on bass. Andrew Tugwell's sound design has both actresses wearing radio microphones, in perfect synch with the band, so Cookin' at the Cookery rocks right to the back row of the Stanley.

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