

## Theater Review (Bridgeport, CT): The Man in Black

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Bridgeport's own Downtown Cabaret Theatre, with its "bring your own picnic" style of cabaret seating, is recognized as one of the premier theatrical venues in the area. This non-profit theater offers year-round productions and derives over 75% of its revenues from box office sales. Since its inception in 1976, the theater has drawn on local and New York talent to produce Broadway-style book musicals as well as original works. Past productions include the American premier of *Blood Brothers* in 1988, and *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* in 1979 before it appeared on Broadway.

Recently, the Downtown Cabaret Theater presented the world debut of *The Man in Black*, a live stage revue of the music of the late Johnny Cash. This show is not one of those jukebox musicals where the songs of an artist are woven around a contrived or flimsy tale. *The Man in Black* is a celebration of the songs of Johnny Cash, faithfully brought to life to try to provide "the up close and personal LIVE experience of his music." Developed and performed by Scott Keeton, an actual distant cousin of the Cash clan, *The Man in Black* aptly does just that. It is a theatrical event filled with master musicianship and tuneful reminiscences, guaranteed to entertain theatergoers with country music, gospel, and rock and roll as performed by the one and only Johnny Cash.

The show opens with a train whistle and an ingenious 3-D image of a train approaching on the tracks. Out comes Mr. Keeton who says, "Hello, I'm not Johnny Cash," before launching into the song "Folsom Prison Blues." Though not an imitator, the effect of Mr. Keeton's voice is immediate, because with his rich bass-baritone, he sounds just like Johnny Cash. Mr. Keeton's entertaining stage presence and performance lets the audience know that they are seeing and hearing something special with each Cash classic that is sung. It helps that Mr. Keeton is an accomplished rock and roll performer, who not only shares the family tree, but also has an impressive resume of his own. He has toured the world and performed with Eric Idle, Bo Diddley, Magic Slim, and Dick Dale, and has played Carnegie Hall with Art Garfunkel.

Keeton shares the stage with his band, which features Jack Heilaman on lead guitar, Craig Wetz on bass, and James Keys on drums. Also sharing the stage is Ashley DePascale, a Connecticut native, who portrays June Carter in all her upbeat and perky glory, providing a marked contrast to the tone of Mr. Cash's sometimes somber and melancholy songs of struggle and redemption.

The songlist itself is impressive. Keeton covers, "Cry, Cry, Cry," "Get Rhythm," "A Boy Named Sue," "Busted," "Cocaine Blues," "Daddy Sang Bass," "The Ballad of Ira Hayes," "I Walk the Line," "Ring of Fire," and more. My favorites included a version of "Oh Lonesome Me," which had me thinking of good times back at Tootsie's in Nashville, and "Ghost Riders in the Sky," which featured a rousing and impressive section of dueling guitars between Mr. Keeton and Mr. Heilaman. For me, the showstopper was "I've Been Everywhere," where with the help of some cue cards held by "June," Mr. Keeton deftly delivers Cash's famous tongue-twisting song.

*The Man in Black* not only takes the audience for a trip down memory lane, it reminds us of the legacy of the life and music of Johnny Cash, whether it be obtaining faith through trials and tribulations, or recognizing the struggles of the oppressed, the downtrodden, the imprisoned, and the poor. It is a reflection of hope for everyman as well as a celebration of musical genius that spanned generations, from the first rockabilly hits like "Get Rhythm" to cover versions of Depeche Mode's "Personal Jesus" and Nine-Inch Nails' "Hurt." Most of all, *The Man in Black* is a musical celebration that will leave the audience singing.

Unfortunately, *The Man in Black* closed on May 24th, but with the Downtown Cabaret, there's always hope that a sold out show will return for a second run. I highly recommend the show to theatergoers should it arrive in your town. As for the Downtown Cabaret, you can check out their next musical performance, *The Kingston Trio*, on August 22nd. Under consideration for the theater are the following: Livingston Taylor,

Shirley Jones, Pat McRoberts, The Leading Men of Broadway, and It's a Wonderful Life. Visit the theater website, or email [InTheWorks@DowntownCabaret.org](mailto:InTheWorks@DowntownCabaret.org) to let them know what you want to see.