

Fine Arts

Where the voices come from

Blue Room's production of original rock 'musical' suffers from a dual personality

By [John W. Young](#)

The latest production at the Blue Room Theatre can't quite make up its mind whether it wants to be a play or a concert.

It is not a musical. And it is definitely not an opera--rock, classical, pop or otherwise. For one thing, not enough characters present themselves directly through song. Rather, what we have instead are scenes from the main character's life interspersed with songs from a live band that sort of fill in the character's internal workings. Sort of.

The protagonist here is Sky, a tattoo-festooned, modern-rocker guy. When we are first introduced to him, he is confined to a kind of mandatory detox facility, planing out on government provided methadone and avoiding opening up to his assigned therapist. Of course, Sky does open up--he has to, or we wouldn't have a story. And out comes his sordid, Jerry Springeresque background--alcoholic dad, abused mom, haunted childhood.

One day, Sky's mom packs him into the family car and runs off for California. "We'll see stars," she says, almost hypnotized. Sky points out that they're now called celebs. Of course, once in Hollywood, Sky determines to become a celeb himself, and he gradually makes connections, working his way up the ladder. However, Sky tells us these things. He rarely sings them. It is mostly the band that performs the songs here.

Songwriter-musician-singer Aaron Lyon and the band present his songs almost meticulously. Bassist Chris Hunter and drummer Clint Bear are one solid rhythm section. The background singers--Sarah Foster, Giovanna Leah and Judi Souza--hit their notes precisely. Guitarist Maurice Spencer demonstrates an expert level of proficiency at coaxing a multitude of sonic effects from his instrument, from delicate melody lines to driving power chords. Even Spencer's occasionally induced feedback seems choreographed, it is that well controlled.

The acting is good, too.

Beau Hirshfield is reasonably engaging as Sky. And, in those few moments when he actually gets to sing, he does pretty well. At times, however, his delivery and body language remind one of mediocre musical-type acting--just a bit exaggerated.

By far the strongest acting comes from Slim Barkowska and director Jeremy Votava. Votava casts himself as King, a kind of been-there, done-that mentor figure for Sky. Votava does a nice juggling act of rendering the character abrasive yet likable. King is not trying to rip away the young man's preconceptions as much as he is simply being honest. Barkowska pulls double duty as both Sky's drunken, abusive father and his compassionate yet frank therapist. Barkowska brings his usual economic body language and facial expressions, relying more on control of his voice for conveying his characters' personalities and intentions.

Michelle L. Smith does what she can with the role of Sky's wife, Val. Val winds up quite literally as the subject of a rock song, one with somewhat less depth than many better-written tunes. Judi Souza is functional as Mel, Sky's mother. We can sympathize with Mel's flight to California from her abusive husband. But we simply do not get enough of the character to fully empathize with her.



Photo by Tom Angel

WE WANT OUR MTV Finally in the limelight, Sky and his band are interviewed by an MTV-type veejay, in the Blue Room's original production of Hollywood Outsider. Pictured left-to-right are Maurice Spencer, Clint Bear, Chris Hunter, Beau Hirshfield (who plays main character Sky), Aaron Lyon (who wrote the songs for the show; the "book"--consisting of the spoken dialogue and scenes--was scripted by director Jeremy Votava), and Sarah Foster (who plays veejay Gemini). This situation was one of the few times the band and the actors directly interacted and with engaging results, in what otherwise seems like a show with a slightly fractured personality.

Hollywood Outsider
The Blue Room Theatre, Thursday-Saturday, Through Saturday,
Sept. 28, 7:30 p.m.

www.blueroomtheatre.com

Again, one of the problems with all this is simply that most of the characters do not introduce themselves to us by song. And however "old hat" that might seem, when done correctly it is still the most effective means of establishing character, allowing the music itself to fill in the emotional details. Another problem is there is not enough interaction between the actors and the band. Given that the musicians are inescapably situated on stage, even when the actors are pantomiming the occurrences in the lyrics of a song, we tend to watch the band--that's where the voices are coming from.

Still, one can admire the ambition of this project.