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'New World' presentation's quality make it worth peek

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"Songs for a New World" is a tough sell.

First and foremost, it's difficult to explain - a series of songs, ranging from gospel to jazz to ballad to comic relief, tackling subjects such as love, hate, marriage, divorce, Santa Claus and Betsy Ross.

They're all written by a Tony Award-winning composer that even many theater fans have never heard of, and you'd be hard-pressed to get anyone to name more than one song from the show.

Still, it's something special, especially in the hands of Magic City Actors Theatre. Their "Songs for a New World" opened Friday night, and it's just about perfect.

Early in Jason Robert Brown's amazing score, we hear words that will become a theme throughout the night: "It's about one moment." That couldn't be farther from the truth - this evening is about many, many moments, and it's a pity that only a half-full house was there to hear them.

As is often the case, Carl Dean does triple duty as director, choreographer and cast member, and the results are spectacular. Dean and the rest of his cast (Kristen Bowden, Jennifer Gamble, Kristi Tingle Higginbotham, Kendall Johnson, Kimberly Kirklin, Lucas Pepke and music director/singer Michael King) are all top-notch, handling the considerable vocal demands of Brown's score with great results.

Higginbotham, always solid, is at her best with "Stars and the Moon," the most well known song in the show. It's a great song even when someone misses the point, but Higginbotham grasps every bit of irony in the cabaret favorite.

Bowden, too, seems particularly at home singing Brown's music, and she should. She starred in the national tour of "Parade," which won the composer the Tony Award. Her "Christmas Lullaby" is achingly beautiful, and she and Pepke have great chemistry in the duet "I'd Give It All For You."

Effusive praise? You betcha, and there would be much more where that came from if deadlines and space limitations didn't interfere.

The bottom line is this. Take a chance, even if you've never heard of Jason Robert Brown of "Songs for a New World." Go see it. You won't be disappointed.

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