

Accomplished *I Only Have Eyes for You*

by Jane Rosenberg | Seen and Heard International

Al Dubin, the lyricist who, along with Harry Warren, brought us such memorable songs as “We’re in the Money,” “42nd Street,” “You’re Getting to Be a Habit With Me,” “Lullaby of Broadway,” and “September in the Rain” is the subject of the new musical, *I Only Have Eyes for You*. Though Dubin wrote upbeat lyrics such as “Tiptoe Through the Tulips,” the song that most embodies his life story is the haunting ballad, “Boulevard of Broken Dreams.”

With a fondness for alcohol, drugs, food, gambling, and women, Dubin’s appetites defeated him, and he died alone at age 54 of barbiturate poisoning and pneumonia. This two-act musical chronicles his life from optimistic youth who woos Broadway entertainer, Helen McKlay, to self-destructive middle-aged man who, after making it big in Hollywood, spirals out of control.

With a talented cast of seasoned performers, simple but charming sets, clever choreography, and winning music, this is a largely pleasurable evening of musical theatre. What is missing, unfortunately, is a clear concept. The first act feels like a musical revue, strung together with incidents from Dubin’s early life: the courting of his future wife, Helen; a night in the trenches with his war buddy, Patrick; a visit with his Russian Jewish parents; and his first meeting with Harry Warren, cleverly set at the Oyster Bar in New York’s Grand Central Station. The second act, which delves more deeply into his skyrocketing career and subsequent decline, is more fully formed.

As a whole, the production feels like a work in progress. Many of the songs have been covered in *42nd Street*, the Broadway hit based on the classic 1933 film. What intrigues in this new musical is the problematic life of Dubin, but the integration of his songs into his life feels forced and hollow in the first act and only gains steam in the second. I left wondering what really caused this man to self-destruct. The answers offered in this bio-musical didn’t quite add up: disapproving parents, the war buddy who takes the bullet meant for our hero and dies in his place, his unquenchable hunger and thirst. Perhaps the book by Jerry Leichtling and Arlene Sarner didn’t go far enough or perhaps Dubin himself didn’t yield to their investigations.

Leichtling and Sarner chose to focus their narrative on the love story of Al and Helen. Unlike biopics of artists as tormented geniuses who struggle with their craft, Dubin is



shown as a facile wordsmith who can string lines of rhyme together in an instant. This makes it difficult to investigate the man as artist. We are given Dubin as a hit-maker who misses deadlines due to his out-of-control vices, rather than an exploration of artistic insecurities that might have propelled him into this self-destructive cycle.

Nevertheless, there was a happy ending and tune after tune for listening pleasure, served up by a delightful cast. Jared Gertner was involving as Dubin, and with his sweet tenor gave an aching version of “Boulevard of Broken Dreams” that tore at the heartstrings. As his wife, Helen, Nikki Bohne was convincing both as ingénue in the first act and long-suffering wife in the second. Their duets had a simple charm that added to the poignancy of their relationship.

Constantine Rousouli as composer Harry Warren was an attractive and charismatic performer. Kayla Parker channeled Ruby Keeler’s sincerity and winning personality. Other standouts were Justin Michael Wilcox as a narcissistic Al Jolson, Elijah Rock as a larger-than-life Cab Calloway, and Renee Marino as a divinely sexy Carmen Miranda. The ensemble as a whole offered clever touches of humor with their quirky movements, tap dancing, and stage business.

Kay Cole’s choreography combined the innocence and enthusiasm of early movie musicals with the sultry sexiness of our times to create a cohesive vision. Of particular note was her staging of the song “42nd Street” with a line of dancers dressed in vivid red who tapped their feet and kicked their legs while seated, inventing a freighted modernist version of the original. With only a dozen dancers she managed to compete with Busby Berkeley’s mega productions – not a small accomplishment by any means.