

Review: Songs, not story, propel the Al Dubin bio-musical 'I Only Have Eyes for You'

By Margaret Gray | Los Angeles Times



Al Dubin wrote lyrics for enduring songs of the stage and screen, won an Academy Award in 1936 for “Lullaby of Broadway” and may be best known for his five-year partnership with Harry Warren at Warner Bros., which produced a string of hits — “42nd Street,” “We’re in the Money,” “I Only Have Eyes for You” and “The Boulevard of Broken Dreams,” among others. A man of lusty appetites, however, Dubin (1891-1945) spent his final years alone, obese and addicted to alcohol and morphine before dropping dead on a Manhattan street at age 53.

Given the readymade score, the outsize personality, celebrity friends, bad habits and a tragic arc, Dubin seems as good a candidate as any for a bio-musical. And indeed, “I Only Have Eyes for You: The Life and Lyrics of Al Dubin” has just opened at Hollywood’s Montalban Theater. The billing in press materials as “the real story behind 42nd Street” is enticing but misleading in at least two respects: The book, by Jerry Leichtling and Arlene Sarner, is neither especially realistic — with its unexpectedly happy ending — nor, strictly speaking, a story. Yes, biographical scenes have been interspersed between 21 of Dubin’s songs, but they never amount to the narrative that could elevate this show above a musical revue.

That’s not to say that the production is devoid of all pleasures: The songs are catchy and tuneful, and the performances are directed and choreographed with verve and sparkle by Kay Cole. John Iacovelli designed the spare but efficient set pieces with an art-deco flair, and Debra McGuire has added eye-pleasing period costumes. The live band, led by music director Gerald Sternbach, keeps the house jumping.

Jared Gertner, who played the feckless Elder Cunningham in the first national tour of “The Book of Mormon,” leads

the cast as Dubin and is an affable, endearing actor who could carry a show with one hand. Nikki Bohne, as Dubin’s long-suffering wife, Helen, has a bright stage presence and a lovely voice.

So those content to enjoy performances of well-written songs — admiring, along the way, the volume, diversity and emotional range of Dubin’s output — will have no reason to complain. But anybody who expects to be caught up in a coherent and engaging plot at the same time is in for a letdown.

It’s not that the writers couldn’t find any dramatic incidents in Dubin’s life. He converted to Catholicism, to the horror of his Jewish parents, to marry a “shiksa showgirl.” He fought in World War I. He won over a skeptical Warren (Constantine Rousouli) with flashy wordplay. He went to Hollywood and hung out with Ruby Keeler, Busby Berkeley and Al Jolson. But the creators never quite settled on the story they wanted to tell. Could they depict Dubin as an American hero? That might be bit of a hard sell, what with the gluttony, drug addiction, chronic unreliability and flagrant philandering. On the other hand, harping too much on the tragedy of his death might spoil the pleasure of his songs. So they compromised: Their Dubin would be an essentially good man with a psychic wound that would drive him toward — but not all the way to — destruction.

As the wound, they settled on the death of a friend in the war. But the scene in which this trauma occurs is oddly perfunctory. Dubin and his fellow soldier, an Irishman named Patrick (Jeffrey Scott Parsons), have traded no more than a few lines of tepid trench banter before Patrick agrees to take Dubin’s watch and is — it is implied — blown up. Patrick disappears from the play for a long time, only to return as a ghost at the exact moment Dubin is winning his Oscar. From this vision, and from Dubin’s generosity to homeless veterans he encounters, we are meant to understand that he has been tormented by guilt over Patrick’s death all these years.

It’s not especially persuasive, and neither is the love story that ultimately redeems the hero of this heavily retouched portrait. Dubin, a gifted lyricist, has so far not made the translation into a great American musical. But the songs hold up.

“I Only Have Eyes for You: The Life and Lyrics of Al Dubin,” Montalban Theater, 1615 Vine St., Hollywood. 8 p.m. Wednesdays thru Fridays; 2 and 8 p.m. Saturdays; 3 p.m. Sundays. Ends June 12. (323) 461-6999 or *Running time: 2 hours, 30 minutes.*