

I Only Have Eyes for You

by Rob Stevens | Now Playing (Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle)

Al Dubin and Harry Warren were one of the first songwriting teams to move from Broadway to Hollywood with the advent of talking pictures in the late 1920s. As a result of The Great Depression, their publishing company was purchased by Warner Brothers and they ended up writing scores of songs for a string of Busby Berkeley film musicals. The new stage musical *I Only Have Eyes For You*, subtitled *The Life and Lyrics of Al Dubin*, is a jukebox musical disguised as a biography. The book, by the married screenwriter team of Jerry Leichtling and Arlene Sarner, leaves no cliché unharmed, no sentiment un-milked. There is even a ghost! Dubin may have been a gregarious wordsmith with unbridled passions for food, drink, drugs, gambling and women but this show puts a happy face on all his vices.

Luckily 21 of Dubin's songs are featured in the show, from his early comic fodder like "Frankfurter Sandwiches" and "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" (made indelible in the late 1960s by Tiny Tim) to the Academy Award winning "Lullaby of Broadway." The cast is in fine voice and the music sounds great under the musical direction of Gerald Sternbach leading a 10 piece band. Kay Cole's direction is steady and keeps the action flowing through the various scenes and numbers. Her choreography at times is exquisite, especially the big tap numbers, but at times it is also puzzling. Waiters and Pullman Porters tap dance their customers to their seats. Cole also stages several dance reprises that in olden days would have taken place in front of the curtain while scenery was being changed. Here they just take up time because no scenery is moved and seems to be a deliberate ploy to extract more applause. The dancers do deserve the applause and they receive it at the finale of their numbers. To blatantly try to extend that time and again becomes tiresome. The big first act closer "42nd Street," with the chorus in devilish red attire and with all the unison hat shenanigans and the hands slapping thighs, comes across as *A Chorus Line* meets *The Will Rogers Follies* as staged by Bob Fosse.



Jared Gertner provides a strong focus as Dubin, exuding a joyful noise in his performance and proving he has a strong voice in his finale "Boulevard of Broken Dreams." But that song and many more just seem shoe-horned into the show, not really making sense to the scene preceding or following them. It seems more of a case of "we haven't had a song for several minutes, here's another hit he wrote, let's stick it in here." Nikki Bohne as Dubin's long suffering wife and muse is a real find and makes the most of her character's thin development. Constantine Rousouli as Harry Warren provides a solid, professional counterpoint to Dubin's over indulgences. The talents of Valerie Perri are wasted on her two small roles but she really has fun being manhandled by the "Mechanical Man" on a film set. Kayla Parker dazzles as the young Ruby Keeler. Her dance duet with Julian DeGuzman to "You're Getting to be a Habit with Me" is a highlight.

A show with such famous, iconic and beloved characters as Keeler, Al Jolson, Busby Berkeley, Cab Calloway and Carmen Miranda should sizzle and sparkle instead of just plod along. This is one show that probably should have chucked the book and just been performed as a musical revue a la Smoky Joe's Café. Another problem is that many of these songs are familiar from the long running Broadway musical *42nd Street* which the printed program notes is currently enjoying a new National tour. That tour arrives at the Pantages Theatre in Hollywood in June. The book for that show, campy as it is, really delivers the goods.