

ARTS

Taking modern Broadway on the road

By Denise Taylor | August 23, 2007

When you make your living playing show tunes at piano bars, sometimes you don't want to hear that "the hills are alive with the sound of music" yet again. Sometimes, you start wishing that those loudmouth hills would, well, hush up.

"Rodgers and Hammerstein, Lerner and Loewe -- they're all great, but I like to listen to contemporary musicals as well," said pianist Rob Wendel of Wayland. "But there seems to be a freeze-frame. People always request show tunes from the '40s, '50s, and '60s, and then there's this cutoff point once you get to the '80s. No one asks for the newer stuff."

Wendel and tenor Steve SanSoucie, who are married, are sure the time warp is not a result of disdain for new Broadway. Rather, they're certain many of us have simply not heard the scores of the great modern musicals "Avenue Q" and "Wicked." So they hatched a plan and now the "Hairspray"-deprived and "Rent"-needy need suffer no more.

In 2005 the pair founded Broadway 25, a cabaret troupe dedicated to performing music from shows produced in the last 25 years, and it seems they hit a newfangled chord.

For their past three seasons, the six-member troupe has packed fans into Boston's Club Café for shows that feature everything from show-stopping solos to lively four-part harmonies and always at least one rather creative interpretive surprise (such as crooning "Holding Out for a Hero" from "Footloose" while dressed as hero sandwiches).

On Saturday, they venture for the first time into the suburbs with their current production, "One Night Only" (named after the "Dream Girls" song), which is on stage at The Center for Arts in Natick. The show features SanSoucie, baritenor Jaime Blanch of Watertown, alto Debbie Cohen Skelton of Natick, bass Bill Toll of Sudbury, and soprano Keri Boisclair of Somerville, as well as Wendel on keyboard.

"We don't take the safe way with this show. We don't do 'Sound of Music.' We're just a little more dangerous than that," said Wendel.

On the program are scads of their favorites, from the lightning-quick "You Can't Stop the Beat" from "Hairspray" to the soulful "One Night Only." This show's surprise number hails from "Wicked."

SanSoucie "is going to have a unique costume on for part of it," said Wendel. "I won't give it away, but it does involve a ballerina tutu and work boots. But that's all I'm saying."

Silly ballet-wear aside, the pair are quite serious about their mission. "The music is just so good that people need to hear it, but not everyone can afford to see every Broadway show," said SanSoucie. "So Broadway 25 is sort of like a smorgasbord. You buy one ticket and get to hear a sampler of the best songs from the last 25 years."

"I suppose it's just the educator in me talking, but this is music people ought to be exposed to and ought to know," added Wendel, who gives piano lessons by day. "Some of the great songwriters of our time are writing for Broadway."

"One Night Only" plays at 7:30 p.m. Saturday at The Center for Arts in Natick, 14 Summer St. Doors open at 7 p.m. Tickets: \$20, seniors/students \$18. Call 508-904-7171 or visit broadway25.com.

