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Going Down Swingin'

reviewed by Lyssa Mandel

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There are many areas in which **Going Down Swingin'** (The Don Giovanni Radio Hour), like the era of optimism in which it's set (1956), **has plenty. Plenty of tongue-in-cheek faux-product placement; plenty of delicious tunes, from sultry blues to early rock 'n' roll; plenty of clear-cut, if archetypal, characters slinging smart bullets of dialogue across the stage. In fact, Swingin' is a bountifully watchable musical almost across the board.** What Peter Hilliard (music) and Matt Boresi (words) could push for more of in this delightful but meandering plot is drive. And perhaps related: clocking in at 2 hours and 40 minutes, it's not that any of the material isn't enjoyable—it's just that there is so much of it.

From the first blackout, **we are transported to a world on the cusp between radio's twilight and the aggressive dawn of television.** In the dark we hear the comforting scratchiness of an old-fashioned radio drama, replete with silly, good-natured vocal tricks and histrionics. Lights come up on a recording studio where the entirety of the play is set, with a jazz combo inhabiting a corner of the stage. This is the world of Dean Newhouse, a womanizing, pill-popping radio personality who hosts the "Liberty Cigarettes Hour," a collection of serial stories sharing a rotating cast of actors. As Newhouse, played with slick arrogance by Christopher Shyer, topples under the weight of his own hubris, the parallel downslide of radio's golden era echoes on a larger scale. (It should be noted that **Swingin' also has plenty of nostalgia, which works entirely in its favor.**)

The concept of the action itself is fascinatingly postmodern. Since the bulk of it occurs during rehearsals for the radio program, many of the numbers are incorporated into the program's script as opposed to arising from the characters' elevated emotions, as is usual for musicals. **The result is a happily organic one, especially since some of the characters' larger-than-life radio personalities dovetail nicely with the characters themselves, making the music**

meaningful on multiple levels. Annabelle Stone, an ex-lover of Dean Newhouse and an actress on the radio show, portrays a slinky nightclub bombshell in one radio segment. In a shimmering moment in the first act, Stone—played by the polished Meredith Patterson—stops the show with a smoldering, bluesy number in which she croons, "I've been done wrong," and an awareness ripples through the audience that she is singing both within and without the radio show.

Swingin' is also blessed with a plethora of talent both on- and offstage. Director Jenny Lord brings out airtight performances from the cast, and the designers work uncannily in tandem to create an authentic mid-century world. Standouts among the many players are the keenly specific Tom Deckman, who plays a teen radio star who's far past adolescence, and Marla Schaffel, who gives both genuine heart and cynicism to the role of radio soap star Vera O'Donnell, another of Dean's ex-lovers with a chip on her shoulder. Kate Cusack and Zane Pihlstrom provide costume design that is intelligent and sharp, and informative of the characters.

Perhaps best of all, since so much of Going Down Swingin' lives in the bygone era of radio, it's essentially possible to "watch" the whole of the show with eyes closed. After trying this a few times myself, I emerged with the realization that I, like characters in front of me, was mourning the death of radio and wishing for a simpler time.

Written/created by: Peter Hilliard & Matt Boresi
Directed by Jenny Lord