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## 'Hedwig' provides sorely needed edginess

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**Warning:** The music is loud, and the theater is small. Bring earplugs if you're sensitive to rock music in close quarters.

That said, it would be a mistake to skip Florida Studio Theatre's production of "Hedwig and the Angry Inch." Such displays of hedonistic punk rock and theatrical prowess are rare in these parts.

The title character, Hedwig, is the unlikely hero/heroine in a dramatic story of a "girly boy" growing up in East Berlin before the fall of the Berlin Wall. Abandoned early by his father, Hedwig -- then named Hansel -- finds a ticket out of East Berlin through Luther, an American soldier who pays for the botched sex-change operation that leads to an "angry inch" of scar tissue.

But their happiness doesn't last, and Hedwig finds herself abandoned in a trailer park in Junction City, Kan. Her love of music is matched by that of the general's son, Tommy Speck, but that love affair crashes and burns as well, leaving Hedwig as the "internationally ignored song stylist" behind "Tommy Gnosis," who goes on to narcissistic rock stardom without Hedwig -- taking her heart, and her songs, with him.

The story is much more than merely a concert performance by a transgendered singer. Hedwig's discourses on creation, the nature of love, the search for identity (gender and otherwise) and yearning for wholeness elevate the show into something that is by turns witty, thought-provoking, tragic and compelling.

In what other musical are you likely to hear a discussion of Plato's idea that sex reunites us with our "missing half"?

The story unfolds in the form of a concert in a seedy theater within earshot of a stadium performance by Tommy Gnosis, as Hedwig tells her story between numbers in her own set. Backed by her band, the Angry Inch (Don Dean on bass, Phillis Gessler on keyboard, Stephan Rosser on guitar and Justin Wierbonski on drums), Hedwig screams, whispers and wails through her performance and life story.

David Colbert is absolutely riveting as Hedwig -- so much so that everyone and everything else on the stage is very nearly extraneous. A riotous combination of Mick Jagger and Cher, he high-kicks threateningly around the stage in perilously tall, black patent-leather platform boots, an abbreviated "dress" and a terrifically bad blond wig, his face a mask of Iggy Pop/David Bowie glitter.

Colbert also proves himself a master of a variety of vocal stylings, not only as Hedwig, but in his portrayals of Luther ("Sugar Daddy") and Tommy Gnosis ("Wicked Little Town Reprise")

Theater review

Hedwig and the Angry Inch

Text by John Cameron Mitchell. Music and lyrics by Stephen Trask. Directed and choreographed by Dennis Courtney. Music direction by Michael Sebastian. Reviewed May 7 at the Gompertz Theatre, Florida Studio Theatre, 1241 N. Palm Ave., Sarasota. Through May 26. Tickets are \$29 to \$32. Call 366-9000.

and "Midnight Radio").

The 10 songs of the show range widely in theme and style, but every one accurately conveys its meaning and fits seamlessly into Hedwig's story.

Petra DeLuca sings able backup and counterpoint to Colbert as Yitzhak, Hedwig's sullen, multigendered partner (although their relationship is never clearly defined).

The cast, directed by Dennis Courtney with strong musical direction by Michael Sebastian, struggled in Sunday's matinee with an audience that could hardly have been less appreciative, either of the material or its presentation.

Much of Colbert's between-songs exposition simply dropped into the black hole of the theater - - truly unfortunate, as much of its wit and pathos were lost in pacing that would have felt snappy had there been some interplay with the audience, but instead was sometimes painfully slow.

Florida Studio Theatre is to be applauded for staging such an audacious show. Audiences looking for edgy, provocative shows, and younger audiences who complain there's not much for them on Sarasota's stages, should run, not walk, to the FST box office.

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