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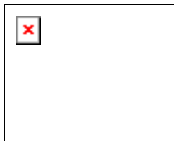
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Sarasota Herald-Tribune (FL)

Highway calls in cabaret's 'On The Road'

January 25, 2004

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KAY KIPLING CORRESPONDENT

The call of the open road has always been a powerful one, and it's been heard by enough songwriters to make "On the Road," FST's latest cabaret offering, a diverse and pleasing one.

Some of FST's cabaret shows have paid tribute to a single composer, such as Cole Porter or Irving Berlin. But a revue shaped around a theme allows more room to in which to play, and the cast of "On the Road" does just that. The first half of the evening has a folk/country focus, with familiar tunes like Hank Williams' "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry," Bob Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind" and Steve Goodman's "City of New Orleans" sung and played (on guitars, banjo, accordion, etc.) by the five-member cast (including musical director Michael Sebastian). Wisely, music arranger Jim Prosser and choreographer-director **Dennis Courtney** have kept things pretty simple, letting the songs speak for themselves without gussying them up too much.

Although the cast members for the most part have vocal skills better suited to Broadway show tunes than the rougher edges of country-folk (with the exception of FST newcomer Louis Tucci, who seems right at home with the genre), they also have enthusiasm and energy, particularly Forrest Richards, the sole female in the group, who frequently does what little talking needs to be done to bridge the songs.

One of Act I's highlights is her passionate version of Carole King's "So Far Away"; another is "Callin' Baton Rouge," which, followed by "Proud Mary," leads to a big finish before intermission.

Act II ventures more into rock/pop music, with a natural segment on cars ("Little Deuce Coupe," "Fun, Fun, Fun") and hitting the road "Easy Rider"-style ("Born to Be Wild," a number where the cast dons black shades).

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Paul Blankenship earns just applause for navigating his way through all those city names in Geoff Mack's "I've Been Everywhere," and it's also fun when the show takes (briefly) to the sky with excerpts from "2001: A Space Odyssey" and "Star Trek." And "Leaving on a Jet Plane," led by Richards and Pat McRoberts, is another crowd-pleaser.

"On the Road" offers a nice balance between the upbeat and the more-pensive sides to wandering.

On the Road

Conceived by Richard Hopkins, **Dennis Courtney**, Jim Prosser, Michael Sebastian, Cristin Kelly and William Myers. Directed by **Dennis Courtney**. Reviewed Jan. 17. Through March 20 at Florida Studio Theatre cabaret, 1241 N. Palm Ave. Tickets are \$20,\$22. Call 366-9000.

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