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THE ARTS

'Piano Men' provides cabaret pop-music lesson

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It's easy enough to come up with some overarching theme behind the Cabaret production of "Piano Men" at Florida Studio Theatre.

Something about the roots of popular music played at a keyboard throughout the 20th century through the fingers of such gifted musicians as Scott Joplin, Ray Charles, Little Richard and Fats Waller to the pop/rock styles of Billy Joel, Elton John and Barry Manilow.

But as a theatrical experience, it's easier still to sit back and enjoy two talented men at the keyboards bracketing a woman with a big voice at the microphone.

The show, created in-house by FST staff under the direction of Richard Hopkins, draws its name from Billy Joel's hit, "Piano Man," and Joel's songs take the lion's share of the two acts.

David Abeles and Scott J. Pearson are the "piano men," who either take turns or support each other at the keyboard. It takes a few tunes for their individual personalities, vocally and at the bench, to emerge.

Abeles emerges as the more soulful, bluesy singer, while Pearson sticks to a more pop-singer style. Pearson really comes into his own, however, with the show's title tune at the start of the second act, giving it the full emotional drive it deserves. And when he steps out from behind the piano to sing Joel's "The Entertainer," he's transformed from a guy at the keyboard to a full-voiced star.

The two men engage in a little banter, most of it unintelligible from the back seats of the cabaret, although they have a good time standing on their benches a la Jerry Lee Lewis to pound out "Great Balls of Fire."

For a Liberace version of "Chopsticks," they attempt to outdo each other before the whole thing collapses in a discordant clangor.

Jannie Jones brings a big voice and a whole lotta sass to her vocals. The threesome whoop it up on Manilow's "Copacabana," with Jones in a fancy feathered headdress and Pearson in a terrifying tiered-sleeve blouse.

The men's outfits -- T-shirt and jeans for Abeles, slacks and open-collared shirt for Pearson -- are a bit understated to go with Jones' sparkly fuchsia cocktail dress and rhinestone forehead ornament.

More photos



REVIEW
Piano Men

Directed and choreographed by Dennis Courtney. Reviewed Jan. 14 in the Goldstein Cabaret at Florida Studio Theatre, 1241 N. Palm Ave., Sarasota. Through March 25. Tickets are \$26 and \$29. Call 366-9000.