

Derivative and uninspired: Gunmetal Blues

Book: Scott Wentworth. **Music and Lyrics:** Craig Bohmler and Marion Adler. **Directed by** Glynis Leshon. **Musical Director:** Craig Bohmler. **Set and Costume Design:** Charlotte Dean. **Lighting Design:** Luc Prairie. **Stage Manager:** Jill Beatty. **CAST:** Doug Balfour, Marion Adler and James Carrol. Theatre New Brunswick.

By Kwame Dawes

TNB's latest offering, *Gunmetal Blues* is not outstanding for its originality. The premise is old. It is a satirical send-off of the Dick Tracy private-eye c-movie of the forties. We have seen this in a million *Saturday Night Live*, *Carol Burnett Shows*, and SCTV programmes. There is a slight twist however. Where the book (Scott Wentworth) appears to be purely "spoof-material" complete with exaggerated cliches, caricatures of the private investigator and his blonde bomb of a client, and a very silly and uninspiring "twist" at the end, the lyrics and music tend towards an emotional realism. The songs are rarely throw-offs, and the best of the numbers seek to invest the cartoon-like characters with genuine emotions and thoughts.

The concept, while refreshing, is highly problematic. The narrative thread is completely inane — and perhaps intentionally so; but it determines, largely, the extent to which the viewer will care about what happens to the characters and what they say. Thus when the songs of pathos and passion which delve variously into the psyche of the blonde, sleazy nightclub singer ("The Blonde Song"), the street derelict and beggar ("Spare Some Change"), and the three main characters who have a strong need to retain a sense of self ("Gives us back our Lives"), are sung, they jar our sensibilities somewhat and seem rather incongruous, functioning as alienating devices of sorts. I suspect that this Brechtian effect is hardly the intent of the artists who produced this work.

Gunmetal Blues, apart from this, lacks the kind of flair and energy that one has come to expect from musicals which are destined for Broadway (the play, according to programme notes is to move to New York soon). There is very little choreography of note to talk off, and the numbers are extremely derivative. In "Shadowplay" we hear the typical Webber fare. In the moving "Spare Some Change" one can't help thinking of *Oliver*, and the Blues are

watered-down, mannered and unconvincing renditions of what the uninitiated call the blues ("Gunmetal Blues"). The performances are inconsistent and fail to sustain the attention of the viewer. Apart from an extremely funny and off-the-wall spoof of the television record marketing network in the "overture" number "Not Available in Stores," Doug Balfour's performance as the Lounge Lizard is disappointing. Balfour's singing pales in comparison to the other two leads. The limits of his range are constantly being exposed throughout the piece. His acting is stiff and contrived. His piano playing, however, is impressive. He performs the entire musical score for the show on stage, doing so with impressive skill.

Marion Adler, the fragmented blonde shows her talent as an actress in playing multiple roles. She has to give credible readings of very sketchily constructed stereotypes of the "dumb blonde". Her singing is often very strong, but without numbers that demand more physical work on stage, one senses that her talents were not completely exhausted by the production. Finally, James Carrol as the private eye carries the role like a pale subdued caricature of Humphrey Bogart, without exploiting the potential for humour inherent in Bogart's self-assurance and sardonic self-deprecating wit. His performance was competent if not memorable, but then that can be a comment made about the entire production.

The most refreshing aspects of what was largely a lackluster production were firstly, the willingness to attempt at a three-hander musical, secondly, the obviously lyric writing skills of Marion Adler, and finally the concept of Buddy Toupee the Lounge Lizard, who while poorly handled by Balfour, could be developed into a fascinatingly funny character. *Gunmetal Blues* must decide where it is going, for the tension between spoof, and realism creates more problems than it displays clever and innovative writing. Perhaps the staging of

such small scale productions is the direction that smaller sized theatres will have to take when it comes to producing musicals. Clearly, *Gunmetal Blues* represents an economical option for smaller theatres today. For such shows to work however, the casts have to be incredibly dynamic, and the writing powerful. The audience will not be easily distracted by the spectacle. Substance will now be demanded and the actors will be deprived of the trappings that normally obscure weaknesses in their performances. *Gunmetal Blues* reminds us of how tasking a challenge this can be.

Gunmetal Blues is hardly challenging theatre for its audience, nor is it a musical of great spectacle. Invariably its reported move to New York will require extremely extensive rewrites as well as a more upbeat staging than that given by experienced director Glynis Leshon. As a Canadian export it will simply re-affirm the sad truth that Canadians are great at doing what Americans love to see and do. There is painfully little that is Canadian about this work except that it demonstrates the Canadian propensity to imitate, with uncanny skill, its American neighbours.

Gunmetal Blues



(left)
 Shuffle Demon Dave
 blows Hockey Night
 at the CHSC - jazz
 lesson number one
 more pics and a
 geordmeister review
 next week

(right)
 Jimmy Flynn sings
 and Mike Mandell
 makes blithering
 idiots out of prominent
 UNB students

