



Helen Zucker

Jacques Brel's music is beautifully interpreted

"Jacques Brel is Alive and Well and Living in Paris" was presented by Opera Lite in association with the Smith Theatre on the Orchard Ridge Campus of Oakland Community College in Farmington Hills.

Jacques Brel may be dead, but his music is alive and well and living to full houses at the Smith Theatre. The four singers who do justice to Brel's bittersweet lyrics are admirably directed by Annette Bergasse and Anthony Lord.

Brel, a singer and songwriter who has a worldwide following, has been translated into many languages. The Smith production is the English version by Eric Blau with additional material by Mort Shuman. Sung in English or French, with or without Theodore Bikel, the unsentimental, melodic, distinct sound of Brel seems never to date.

From the energetic "Mathilda" to the rhythmic "Bachelor's Song," amusingly sung by Will Young, to Betsy Bronson's wonderful rendition of "My Death," through the cast of four singing "Desperate Ones," the startling Brechtian overtones

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and touches of Edith Piaf ring clear. Act I ends with "Amsterdam" and Act II opens with a lively rendition of "The Bulls." Joan Wilson, an energetic dancer, adds a sense of comedy to the evening.

The cast has no problem dissolving into "Old Folks" and rising for the funny "Funeral Tango." Bronson, the most polished member of the cast, does a lovely job with "Marieke." Her sweet, strong voice carries the ballads with ease.

SAD "FANETTE" is followed by "Middle Class," the only song in the revue that seems quaintly "Old" kids don't call anyone "fascist pigs" anymore, let alone policemen. "Next," a great song, and possibly the most Brechtian of Brel's lyrics, is given a properly bewildered, angry, confused-young-soldier treatment by

Bronson, Lord, Wilson and Young leave their cafe stools, move offstage and join the audience for the closing number, "If We Only Have Love," ending on an upbeat note as Brel would have wished.

Anthony Lord.

"Carousell," a song of surpassing charm, has everyone in the house feeling as if he or she is turning faster and faster. As lights spin round on the theater ceiling and walls, the audience and cast seem joined in a delicious child's dream, a spin on a whirling merry-go-round.

Bronson, Lord, Wilson and Young leave their cafe stools, move offstage and join the audience for the closing number, "If We Only Have Love," ending on an upbeat note as Brel would have wished. Beneath the cynicism of some of his songs, the listener can always hear the passionate wish for sanity, love, friendship and beauty to prevail.

Beverly Labuta on piano, Nick Baker on percussion, Peter Tolia on electric guitar/bass and Joseph Labuta on synthesizer handle their musical instruments with ease.

Opera Lite moves on to the Jones-Johnson Theatre on the Royal Oak Campus of Oakland Community College to do Mozart's "The Magic Flute" at 8 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 20, and Friday-Saturday, Feb. 26-27. So far this season this ambitious group is battling a thousand.

Helen Zucker has many years experience reviewing for newspapers and magazines in Michigan, New York and Massachusetts.

Meadow Brook offers a toned-down production

Performances of "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" continue through Sunday, Feb. 21, at Meadow Brook Theatre on the Oakland University campus in Rochester Hills. For ticket information, call the box office at 377-3300.

Deceit and rank truths lurk at the dark center of Tennessee Williams' "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof," a play charged with love, jealousy, greed and sex. Yet "Cat" has its bright humor and biting comic moments as family members maneuver to see who will inherit Big Daddy's fortune when he dies of cancer.

Meadow Brook Theatre's solid production boasts a generally fine cast and an excellent set created by Peter Hicks. The open set showing part of a rich plantation house on the Mississippi delta leaves no private place to hide from the intrusive, insistent presence of family.

Linda Gehring is a stunning Maggie — beautiful, long-legged and an articulate actress. She uses her weighty mane of chestnut hair as though it has a sensual life of its own. All eyes follow when she preens before the mirror, lifting her hair coyly this way and that above her head and when she drapes her mane provocatively over the side of the bed as she lounges in her slip.

Director Carl Schurr's decision to play down the nagging, bitchier side of Maggie's character, to make her more sympathetic and less darkly conniving, diminishes some of the tangled mystery in Maggie's complex personality.

AND IT THROWS the play ever so slightly off balance, just enough to make the grand lie Maggie tells in Act III seem somehow out of character. Deceit must fester at the center of the Williams' play and be bone and sinew in Maggie the Cat.

Paul DeBoy warms infinitely slowly to his part of Brick, the former football star who is Maggie's husband. The script calls for him to be pickled in bourbon and tortured



Cathie Breidenbach

by guilt, but for awhile it looks as though the bourbon has extinguished all his fire and he'll never wake from emotional stupor. Once DeBoy does wake and warm to his part, he holds his own well with the rest of the volatile Pollitt family.

Phillip Locker squeezes every nuance of humor from his part as Brick's obnoxious brother Gooper. He's excellent as the unloved son and father of the pack of brats who periodically lay siege to the house with their cap pistols. It's notoriously difficult to get kids to give finely tuned performances, and the kids in the Meadow Brook production come off merely as indistinguishable stereotypical brats. Peggy Thorp as Gooper's perpetually pregnant wife Mae is another story. She's wonderfully awful and deserves her obnoxious husband and her wailing brood of monster children.

Arthur Beer can add another feather to his cap for his role of Big Daddy. Costumed to bring to mind Earl Ives who originated the role, Beer makes the tough, bulldozer of a man downright likable even as he shoots off his mouth and throws his weight around.

Jeanne Arnold is usually an artist who brings welcome depth and substance to characters, but as Big Mama she seems a pushy Edith Bunker rather than a strong woman capable of matching wits with Big

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Daddy. She walks as though her shoes hurt when she clumps around the set trying ineffectually to railroad her family. Noises matter in "Cat." Children scream, phones ring, fireworks explode in the night and storms rumble across the delta. Sounds invade every corner of the house and make privacy impossible. Perhaps that's why Big Mama walks with a clumpy walk, so everyone can hear her coming. The technical cast handles the sounds well.

In pursuit of sympathetic characters, Meadow Brook Theatre's technically fine production smooths some of the nastier edges of Williams' jagged characters and risks dulling the cutting edge of the play's raw power.

Cathie Breidenbach of West Bloomfield has always loved theater. A former high-school English teacher, she works in public relations, advertising and as a freelance writer.

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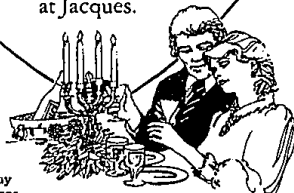
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