

ACCENT

Singers pour hearts, souls into joyful, sad 'Elegies'

By Kathleen Allen

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Kevin Johnson stood at the stage door at Zuzi's Theater, tears streaming down his face.

"I'm just so damned proud of this show," he said, clearly moved after last Friday's opening-night performance of "Elegies," which he directed.

"I'm so proud of this cast."

And well he should be.

Arizona Onstage Production's staging of William Finn's musical was a sometimes somber, often joyous tearfest brought on by singers who felt as deeply as they sang well.

"Elegies" is a song cycle — a series of story-songs loosely connected — that Finn wrote to honor friends and loved ones who have died.

There's a song to the founder of the New York Shakespeare Fest, Joseph Papp; another to character actress Peggy Hewitt; still another to Finn's mother, Barbara. Finn takes characters (and pets) from his life and memorializes them.

And here's the thing: As performed by the Arizona Onstage cast, his friends become our friends; his losses, ours; his songs, our soundtracks.

A number like "Anytime (I Am There)," written at the request of a dying young mother for her children, speaks to all of us who need to believe those we love will always be with us. "I am there each morning. I am there each fall. I am present without warning. And I'm watching it all. . . ." It was sung with such astounding beauty and grace by Diane Thomas that nearly each verse was punctuated by a sob from members of the nearly sold-out audience.

Or the exuberant and profoundly moving "Infinite Joy," delivered with eloquence by Betty Craig.

The songs went on. "My Dogs," about the animals Finn loved — and hated — given a delicious comic twist by Joseph Topmiller; Marcus Terrell Smith's moving rendition of "Saying My Goodbyes"; Kit Runge's funny and touching "Mark's All-Male Thanksgiving."

Accompanying the five singers on piano was Aryo Wicaksono. His smooth playing rang throughout the small theater, never competing with the singers, always working in concert with them.

Finn has a quirky style and doesn't often write the most profound lyrics, and his music isn't always the most nuanced.

But while his songs may not be poetry, his feelings are.

Because of that, this 90-minute, no-intermission show grabs you with the first number and won't let go. You laugh one minute, cry the next three, then laugh the next five.

Enhancing the laughter or the tears was the lighting design by Zachary Ciaburri. The lights sometimes missed their mark, but chalk that up to opening-night jitters. The lighting did what good lighting should: punctuate the emotions, clarify the situations.

Director Johnson has fashioned a simple production, a bit more than a mere concert, but less fussy than a full-scale show. He wisely let the music and the singers say it all.

And they did that with deep feelings and soaring voices.

It was enough to make you cry.

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