

“Monsters!” The Musical

Review by James Furbush
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The most difficult thing in theatre might just be producing an original musical; one conjured from the ether of a writer’s imagination. Cutting through the white noise of this mad, mad world full of lame theater based on the musical styling of Abba, Elvis and who knows what else, is “Monsters! The Musical.”

Gail Phaneuf and Ernie Lijoi have managed to create a thoroughly engaging, very funny show about facing one’s demons in their world debut in a Centastage production at Boston Center for the Arts.

The premise is rather simple in which a woman named Samantha (Lisa Beausoleil) confronts a trio of her psychological demons on her 40th birthday. As with anyone who’s single, unemployed and faced with an overbearing mother, Samantha wakes up to spar with a personified version of Apathy (Patti Hathaway), Fear (Michelle Dowd) and Body (Wayne Fritsche). Like the best classic sitcoms, albeit one whose conceit is slightly more absurd than say “The Honeymooners,” the show takes place in one location and uses its simple concept to deliver witty banter between the characters.

There is much to like about “Monsters!” Further development could tweak the opening scenes a little tighter and expand the hijinks that close the piece. Under the capable direction of Joe Antoun, the performers excel, especially Cheryl McMahon as the overbearing mother. Though many of her one-liner digs at Samantha’s seemingly pathetic existence cut to the bone, they are also the funniest dialogue in the show. It’s no wonder Samantha is a wreck; with a mother like this who needs enemies?

The character of Samantha generates sympathy for her plight, however I couldn’t help but feeling that the problems were more in line with a person a third of her age. Then again, I’m not forty, but it seemed as if the play, especially with the way Beausoleil interpreted the character, might work better if Samantha were 25 or 30. Beausoleil portrayed the character as if Samantha were a naïve girl, not a battle scarred woman.

The monsters gave dead-on performances, from the slovenly, track suit wearing Patti Hathaway to the preposterously tall, slithering, diva Wayne Fritsche and the gothic, mistress of the dark Michelle Dowd. Adding some spunky sex-appeal was Molly Anne Kelleher as a birthday telegram singer.

Fifteen songs written by Lijoi resounded textbook Broadway musical numbers, with several standouts like the funky baseline of “Are You Scared?” to the whimsical “What’s the Point?” and the ruminative “Half a Life.”

When song and dance in other musicals occurs for no reason other than they must, it makes it hard to fall in love with a show. In “Monsters!” each song underscores the emotional and inner workings of Samantha, the vocals and choreography never seemed forced.

“Monsters!” has a lot to say about life, growing up and seizing opportunities despite a cloak of humor. If this play had been written by Beckett, for example, critics would argue over the merits of the production’s absurd sense of human suffering. But that’s not Phaneuf’s goal, per say, she’s more interested in poking fun and providing entertainment to a grateful audience. And there’s nothing wrong with that. How refreshing to see a show with something on its mind other than crafting a lame storyline centered on the music of a rock star. Unless more musicals

like “Monsters!” are produced, supported, and recognized for their value, one day we just might suffer the likes of, say, REO Speedwagon on Broadway.