

Thought-provoking musical Langarm ticks all the right boxes

By  Debbie Hathway

24 Dec 2018

I arrived at the long-awaited opening night of Langarm ready to book more tickets for a family matinee occasion. I had interviewed the iconic South African star of sound and stage David Kramer months earlier to write a preview of the new production and I was excited to see the end result. I told him of my intention to make a block booking before curtain up and he smiled, noting that I had a lot of faith in him. And why shouldn't I? The man is a legend, with a string of awards to his credit, thanks to his knack of crafting memorable, relatable stories to music and lyrics also of his own making.



I was not disappointed. And clearly neither were all those who have been in the audience since. Their response to the musical has created an overwhelming demand for tickets and a resulting extension to the run until Sunday, 3 March 2019. All remaining 2018 performances are sold out.



But back to opening night. I knew from the minute the band started playing that it was going to be a winner. The musical background is ballroom, a dance and music genre that I love, underpinned by the Langarm culture of the 60s – a dance style that I’ve also fallen in love with since being introduced to social dance opportunities in the Cape Town area. I’m one of a handful of English-speaking patrons at those events but the music and atmosphere they offer continues to attract supporters of all ages.

Highlighting our history

In terms of the Langarm story, yes, some critics will say we’ve seen it all before. Boy meets girl, there’s forbidden love, rebellious behaviour and serious consequences – this time in the context of the apartheid laws at the time. But there will be many who can relate to the story, whether they experienced the harsh reality of the apartheid era or not. Kramer’s intention was to highlight a part of our history that’s been “pushed under the carpet” and the quality of the acting combined with each carefully chosen word of script and lyric drove that home. The trauma experienced then is still evident now, referencing harsh realities such as the forced removals in District Six and the “little white lie” (white-passing people of colour trying to stay on the right side of the ruling party during the apartheid regime) that ripped families apart and left a painful legacy.



The challenge of loving across the colour line is portrayed by the lovely young ballroom dancer Angelina, played by Rushney Ferguson, and her eventual dance partner Jeff, portrayed by Cameron Botha. The more riveting performances for me were delivered by seasoned professionals Kim Louis as hotel owner Dinah Levin and Elton Landrew as Eddie Jephtha, leader of the Moonlight Serenaders Langarm band. Their fascinating history is revealed through the story, with the help of Pierre Nelson as “the law” in the role of Van der Byl.

Star of the show was the music

In my opinion, the real star of the show is the music and I wasn't alone wishing I could take it home with me. The band comprising Dylan Roman on keys, Jason Ward on percussion and drums, Zeke le Grange on sax, Joseph Kunnuji on trumpet, Shaun Francke on guitar and band leader Sipumzo Lucwaba on bass was phenomenal and I think most of the audience missed their best yet as they were played out of the theatre. A few of us die-hards stayed standing until the last note died.



Kramer wrestled initially with the temptation to cast ballroom dancers in the leads as well as the chorus but finally confirmed stronger actors in the character roles and dancers who could partner well in Julio Jantjies as Lulu, Angelina's original dance partner, Nadine Suliaman, Nathan Muller, Byron Klassen, Paxton Simons, Shaneé de Beer, Junaide Abrahams, Alexis Petersen and Lindokuhle “Odwa” Makanda. With choreographer Grant van Ster's intimate knowledge of the genre and a former national champion in De Beer in the mix, there are enough choreographic references to the well-loved ballroom dances to keep fans happy. In ballroom formation dancing the trick to building a successful team is to cast dancers who have a similar look, height, build, expression and ability. Not that this was the intention here but I couldn't help but think that Klassen couldn't blend into the background if he tried. He is a consummate performer who absolutely belongs on stage. This style is not what he's used to but, wow, did he nail it! With him you get the whole package – ability and personality oozes out of every pore. Kudos to Van Ster for rising to the occasion in what could not have been an easy choreographic brief, limited to the confines of a very small space, with performers mostly unfamiliar with this dance territory.

And thumbs up to costume designer Widaad Albertus for making the best-fitting tail suits I've seen outside the international competition environment, maintaining the all-important smooth shoulder line. Also making their design contributions to the musical are the inimitable Saul Radomsky on set, Gerda Kruger on lighting and David Classen on sound.



Langarm has all the ingredients to make it worthy of a national if not international tour. Hearty congratulations to all involved. What a way to end one year and begin a new one!

Langarm runs at The Fugard Theatre until 3 March 2019. Tickets range from R150 to R260. Book via the box office on 021 461 4554 or www.thefugard.com. Friends of The Fugard qualify for a 20% discount when booking via the box office. Langarm has a recommended age advisory of no under 12s.

ABOUT DEBBIE HATHWAY

Debbie Hathway is an award-winning writer, with a special interest in luxury lifestyle (watches, jewellery, travel, property investment) and the arts.

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