

Johnson stands out from the shadow of Brel

Godfrey Johnson rocks. Not in the sense that he plays rock and roll, you understand, although given his talent and versatility, he could, should he feel so inclined.

 By [Michael Britton](#) 19 Nov 2010



I first encountered the songs of Jacques Brel at the Chelsea Hotel in Hillbrow during the early 1970s. I cannot remember the name of the fellow who took me there, though I suspect, in hindsight, that he was more interested in my body than in my musical education. No matter, because it never came to that, but the magic of Brel's songs has stayed with me ever since.

Godfrey Johnson is a name that has been cropping up with increasing frequency on my musical radar, most recently in connection with Christine Weir, and prior to that as arranger, composer and musician for Pieter-Dirk Uys cabarets. So when I heard that Johnson was bringing his Shadow of Brel cabaret to the Kalk Bay Theatre, I just had to be there for the opening night.

Goosebumps within two bars

I had goosebumps within two bars of Amsterdam, the opening song of the show, as Johnson took command of the music and captivated his audience. How can he top this? I wondered, swallowing my emotion. I didn't have long to wait - Johnson's rousing rendition of Mathilde, delivered with just the right amount of pain, was followed by the poignant Next. All my favourite Brel songs were performed: If We Only had Love, The Statue, Carousel, Fanette, If You go Away, plus some I was hearing for the first time.

The music of Brel is emotional. It's sadness delivered with humour, love interwoven with pain, the pathos of yearning and loss, and Godfrey Johnson sings and plays them with the sensitivity and passion they deserve. If you don't know the music of Jacques Brel, this is a wonderful way to get acquainted. If you are familiar with Brel's songs, but have never heard Godfrey Johnson, then you are in for a treat as Johnson brings his special touch to the arrangements and his gift for interpretation to the songs.

Noel Coward to Tori Amos, Cole Porter to Billy Joel

The second part of the show was different, in that there were no Brel songs. One page of the programme contains a list of songs, each song with a price printed next to it. Prices range from R5 to R20, composers range from Noel Coward to Tori Amos, from Cole Porter to Billy Joel. The idea is that members of the audience can pay the associated price and request a song to be played in part two of the show. The money raised by this request performance goes to the Darling Trust to assist and empower disadvantaged individuals in the Darling community in the fields of education, health and skills development.

Johnson's touch for this part of the show is lighter, less intense. His version of Alanis Morissette's You Oughta Know, is

turned into a sulky whinge - a far cry from the bitterness and anger which Morrisette intended. Yet Johnson still played and sang with amazing sensitivity, the Tears for Fears song, Mad World, being one of the few that were not given a lighter treatment.

Nod of approval

If the show is to be faulted in any way, it is in length. We got out of the theatre at 11pm, which is a bit late for a school night. That minor quibble aside, the show shines a light in the dark corners of Brel's songs and there is no shadow over Godfrey Johnson - he stands out for his superb handling of intensely emotional material. It may be premature to label Godfrey Johnson as a master of his art, but he certainly has the talent, humour, passion, verve and versatility to become one.

This is a show worth hearing and seeing, but don't take my word for it as I am so obviously biased. Rather, ask my teenage daughter who had heard of neither Brel nor Godfrey Johnson before the show. It got her nod of approval - and it was more than just a grudging nod.

The Shadow of Brel runs at Kalk Bay Theatre, Wednesday to Saturday, from 17 to 27 November, 2010. The show starts at 8.30pm, but patrons are welcome to arrive any time after 6pm for drinks or a meal from the vegetarian-friendly menu.

Tickets for the show only are R100. For bookings phone +27 (0)73 220 5430.

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