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Review: This River a journey of love and life's illusions



By Joe Belanger, The London Free Press
Saturday, October 22, 2016 12:48:10 EDT PM



Brendan Wall, Louise Pitre, centre, and Emm Gryner star in The Grand Theatre production of Joni Mitchell: River, playing until Nov. 5. (MORRIS LAMONT, The London Free Press)

Well, Joni Mitchell from all sides now is pretty sweet.

From her intimate word play on paper to her jazzy, stylized music of her songs and now to the stage in the Grand Theatre's production of Joni Mitchell: River.

Conceived by director Allen MacInnis, Joni Mitchell: River is sure to delight the Canadian icon's fans and tantalize those who know little more than her radio play.

As promised, this is a theatrical concert featuring three singers: musical theatre diva Louise Pitre; Juno award-winning singer songwriter Emr Gryner; and, musical theatre actor Brendan Wall of Once and War Horse.

The band playing the unique arrangements is no less important, led by composer, arranger and guitar player Greg Lowe with Steve Clark on acoustic and electric bass, Tony De Luca on keyboard, saxophone and clarinet, and Stefan Szczesniak on drums.

The music is a star in this show, led by Lowe's skillful playing, which included 18 guitars on loan from London area musicians that he swapped in and out of the show without missing a note, each of them tuned for a different song due to Mitchell's preference for open tunings.

De Luca's flourishes on the keys, sax and clarinet are delicious and tasteful.

All of Mitchell's hits (and then some) are in this show, including Help Me, Chelsea Morning, Woodstock, Both Sides, Now and Big Yellow Taxi. Mitchell's albums have won her nine Grammy Awards and seven other nominations.

The show is described by MacInnis as forming the arc of a love affair, the songs delivered in chapters titled from her lyrics, including I think I'm Falling In Love ... Again, Madmen Sit Up Building Bombs, Why Do You Dream Flat Tires, The Grind is So Ungrateful, This Time You Went To Far, Down, Down, Down The Dark Ladder, Some Bad Dreams Even Love Can't Erase and It's Life's Illusions I Recall.

What is intriguing about this show is the casting, two women and a man.

Wall brings a man's perspective to songs that are either gender neutral or offering a man's perspective, such as Be Cool and Cactus Tree, his voice not the most appealing sound but clear and filled with emotions and even a little fun. Like all three of the singers, his stage presence is solid, yet never overbearing.

Pitre comes as billed. The woman could mine a range of emotion from a blank slip of paper and perform it like it was the last song she'll ever sing. Her take on A Case Of You will bring some in the audience to tears. Pitre is always in the moment, clearly embracing and interpreting Mitchell's lyrics.

Gryner is the less-obvious choice for this show, but proves her worth very quickly with her vocal range, the emotional qualities of her voice and its sound. Gryner's voice is like a touchstone to Mitchell throughout.

No doubt some may be disappointed as this really is more of a concert than theatre with no dialogue.

But MacInnes' *Joni Mitchell: River* is such a beautiful homage to one of the world's great songwriters it is compelling, a dramatically focused and musically satisfying journey of love.

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If you go

What: *Joni Mitchell: River*, conceived and directed by Allen MacInnis, with music arranged and directed by Greg Lowe, starring Louise Pitre, Emm Gryner and Brendan Wall.

Where: The Grand Theatre, 471 Dundas St.

When: Continuing until Nov. 5.

Tickets and Information: \$29.95 to \$82.50 (including taxes and fees), available at the box office, online at grandtheatre.com or by calling 516-72-8800. interesting choice of the three performers

Rating: **** (out of five)

