



***Play It Cool* sets 1950's club tales to a sultry, jazzy tune**

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**BY PAULINE ADAMEK**

Sultry and seductive, the new musical *Play It Cool* opens with a jazzy groove as a trio of musicians entertains us with a pre-show set. There's Big Al Gruskoff on upright bass, Adam Alesi on drums and Louis Durra playing some hot and jazzy piano. With these guys in the corner, we know right away that we're in for a treat.

Bordered on three sides by the audience, the Celebration Theatre's set is a dark and inviting basement club. As the house lights dim, a louche, sexy and slick guy in a black fedora and suit sets the scene with a brief introduction before launching into the first song, "When all the lights in the sign worked." Turns out that's Eddie (Steven Janji), one of the club's regulars. He is then joined by the rest of the cast as they all sing and dance in the second, lively number, "Club Life." Inspired by film noir, *Play It Cool* is set around Mary's Hideaway, a fictional Hollywood Jazz club circa 1953.

We gain insight into the draconian laws governing underground gay and lesbian clubs during that era, when women weren't permitted to tend bar (even if they owned one) and men could be arrested or beaten up merely for dancing with one another. Such serious themes are given a light treatment, with flashes of humor. Everyone in this story has a dream. For the formidable, no-nonsense Mary (Jessica Sheridan), it's to operate her bar quietly without getting done over by greedy cops on the take.

For Henry (Michael Craig Shapiro), it's to have a place where he's free to be himself. In fact, Henry's wistful solo in Act II, "Rainbows," with music by David Benoit, is one of the show's unexpected highlights

But for the other characters, things are a great deal more complex. Eddie is a sleazy character always looking for an angle to get ahead. Will (Andrew Pandaleon) is a confused young kid straight off the bus from Kansas who is looking to break into show biz. Lena's story (Katie Campbell) is the most complicated. As Mary's girlfriend and the club's leading performer, she has it made. But she's itching to get discovered and move into the big time.

The lyrics for *Play It Cool* were written by Mark Winkler, while the book is by Larry Dean Harris. Winkler has collaborated here with several composers, including Grammy-nominated jazz recording artist Dan Siegel and Dreamworks writer/composer Phil Swann, who co-wrote seven of the seventeen or so new songs for this production.

The jazz band is a versatile outfit, jumping from jazz to swing to latin cha cha rhythms when required. Marvin Tunney's choreography deserves a mention for its deceptive simplicity and crisp, effective moves. The entire cast is light on their feet during the company numbers.

Sharon Rosen directs the show with a sure hand, eliciting the best performances from her talented cast. As Mary, Sheridan really shines with her fantastic portrayal of a tough barkeep with a soft center. When things take a turn for the worse, your heart breaks along with hers.

\* *Play It Cool* runs through July 16, Thursdays through Saturdays at 8pm and Sundays at 3pm. Celebration Theatre, 7051B Santa Monica Blvd. (1/2 block east of LaBrea), Hollywood. (323) 957-1884. [www.celebrationtheatre.com](http://www.celebrationtheatre.com).