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Theater Review: Soul Crooners 2

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Photo by Don Daly.

When it comes to presenting musical revues, Westcoast Black Theatre Troupe has it down to a formula: Kick off the evening with lots of energy and keep it coming, pack the show with hits most people in the audience will remember and sway along to, and oh, yes—have the cast members sing directly to the women in the front row who are old enough to be their mothers.

It works like a charm with the current production, *Soul Crooners 2*, which, as you can tell, is a follow-up to a previous show of tunes from the likes of Lou Rawls, Sam & Dave, Bill Withers, Donny Hathaway and others. WBTT artistic director Nate Jacobs has a knack for pulling together these compilations of songs from the '60s or '70s, putting his performers through a lot of familiar period moves as they croon; here, he serves as director, choreographer and one of the cast as well. And he fares well on numbers including Luther Ingram's (If Loving You Is Wrong) I Don't Wanna Be Right, The Spinners' Could It Be I'm Falling in Love and Al Green's L-O-V-E, which closes Act I with a bang.

Jacobs has the falsetto notes down when needed, and for the most part his fellow performers do, too. The faces here are familiar; not only Jacobs but WBTT stalwart Leon Pitts II and two younger troupe

members, Michael Mendez and Chris Eisenberg. They've been in several WBTT shows, too, but it's nice to see how they're developing more and more of a polished stage manner, as well as improving their vocal skills. Mendez has the ladies eating out of his hand for 'Cause I Love You, and Eisenberg gets to really rev up the show's excitement with Wild Cherry's Play That Funky Music; in fact, the funkier numbers here get a great response from the audience. And Pitts gets a great response, too, whether he's getting all smooth and sexy a la Lou Rawls on You'll Never Find Another Love Like Mine or doing some heart-tugging on If You Don't Know Me by Now.

There's a fifth member of the cast: Emmanuel Avraham, who serves to introduce some of the numbers and provide commentary on the ensembles or soloists who performed them. No offense to him, but that little bit of narrative really isn't necessary; the songs sell themselves. And a glance at the program will remind you of any groups—the Stylistics, the O'Jays, the Delfonics, etc.—you may have temporarily forgotten.

In a way, there's yet another member of the cast; that's musical director Jay Dodge, who's always provided WBTT's singers with a strong, driving beat and this time out is backed by four fellow musicians who are just as strong. Don't fight the feeling; just surrender to the power of soul.

Soul Crooners 2 continues through March 24; call 366-1505 or go to wbttssrq.org.