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REVIEW JAZZ

Paula West stylishly spans jazz, cabaret

BY TERRY PERKINS
Of the Post-Dispatch

Paula West made a memorable St. Louis debut Tuesday evening at the Grandel Theatre's Cabaret Series, turning in a performance that successfully bridged the sometimes blurry boundary between cabaret and jazz vocal styles.

Unlike most cabaret performers, West didn't perform a themed program that highlighted a specific composer or legendary performer. Her set list drew heavily from the so-called great American songbook, and classic songs by such greats as Rodgers and Hart, Harold Arlen and Cole Porter.

But West also featured compositions by the likes of Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie, Dave Frishberg, Oscar Brown Jr. and Antonio Carlos Jobim.

Paul West

When: 8 p.m. through Saturday; 3 p.m. Sunday

Where: Grandel Theatre, 3610 Grandel Square

How much: \$17-\$40

More info: 314-534-1111

West also worked with piano, bass and drums rather than the usual spare cabaret approach of just a vocalist and pianist. This expanded instrumental lineup provided her with a wider, more complex framework for her sure-handed, stylish interpretations of tunes such as Arlen's "Blues in the Night," Brown's "The Snake" and Frishberg's "Peel Me a Grape."

In addition, pianist Bruce Barth, bassist Tom Kennedy and drummer Montez Coleman, all excellent jazz musicians with national reputations, provided supple, swinging accompaniment that unerringly tracked West's every vocal twist and turn.

All three had the opportunity to showcase their skill in solo turns as well. Kennedy's bass solos on "Mountain Greenery" and "You Fascinate Me So" were highlights, and Barth's keyboard work and Coleman's drumming on a medley of "Caravan" and "A Night in Tunisia" helped West successfully meld those two rhythmically complex tunes.

West would prefer not to be classified as strictly a jazz singer or a cabaret stylist, and her performance at the Grandel underscored her ability to combine cabaret's focus on the integrity of a song's lyrics and the improvisational approach of jazz. West's reading of each song in her two sets communicated the lyrics clearly and precisely. But she also made each song her own through subtle, interesting rhythmic variations and unique melodic nuances within the phrasing of those lyrics.

In a fall concert season that's already featured fine performances by vocalists LaVerne Butler and Dee Dee Bridgewater — and the anticipation of upcoming shows by Nnenna Freelon and Rene Marie — West's performance at the Grandel may just turn out to be one of the most memorable.