

Theater Review: ‘Living Here In Allentown’ the story behind Brosky songs

Saturday, March 12, 2016 [1] by **Paul Willistein** pwillistein@tnonline.com [2] in **Focus** [3]

The title of “Steve Brosky The Musical: Living Here In Allentown,” which continues at 3 p.m. March 13 and 8 p.m. March 19, Charles A. Brown Ice House, Bethlehem, is a bit of a misnomer.

To be sure, the two-act, 13-song show is about Brosky, the award-winning singer-songwriter and Allentown native. In a larger sense, though, the show, as written by Brosky and George B. Miller, who directs, is about mid-century America and the impact of rock ‘n’ roll, the Vietnam War the hippie era and the working class.

- [Comments \(0\)](#) [4]

Brosky writes story-songs. “Living Here In Allentown” is the story behind his songs.

In this, Brosky is the everyman through whom we experience various events. Along the way, you learn a lot about Brosky, much of which I didn’t know even though I’ve cowritten songs with Brosky, some of which are included in the show and available CD (“That’s What She Said,” “15th Street Bridge Blues,” “The Ballad Of John Lennon” and “Do The Dutch”).

By the way, it’s a little unnerving to see one’s self portrayed as a character onstage (Paul Willistein is played by Jeremy Thompson, who’s better-looking).

Thompson and the other five actors (Joshua Tyler Altorfer, Justin Ariola, Valerie Bittner, Thomas Kennebeck, Jennie Olah) jump in and out of multiple characters with ease and assuredness. At one point, three actors are on stage simultaneously portraying Brosky. It’s a fascinating technique devised by writer-director Miller, sort of a Brosky triptych. It’s certainly a trip.

A standout in portraying at least four distinct characters is Bittner, whose stage presence is dynamic and unforgettable.

“Living Here In Allentown” debuted for two performances, Nov. 20, 21, 2015, McCoole’s Arts & Events Place, Quakertown, where I first saw it. The Bethlehem production, while essentially the same in staging, songs and dialogue, seemed more expansive in its March 11 Bethlehem debut on the large Ice House stage. The lighting and sound by City Entertainment Systems and sound and video design by Dan McKinney (the huge room’s superb acoustics showcase the folk-rock and blues chops of the stellar musicians: Jimmy Meyer, electric guitar; Wayne Maura, drums; Suavek Zaniesienko, electric bass; Tim Jackson, trumpet, and Brosky, acoustic guitar, vocals) give the show a Broadway sheen.

The themes are relevant: Brosky apparently ingested lead paint as a child growing up in Allentown’s Sixth Ward (which may have affected Brosky’s cognitive ability in school); a homeless person Brosky encountered as a teen was a World War II veteran (foreshadowing Brosky’s own life), Brosky’s Vietnam War service was like scenes out of the movies “Platoon” and “Apocalypse Now,” and his “unwelcome home” as a Vietnam vet builds to one of the most poignant scenes and songs, “Vietnam Blues.”

The show is also frequently laugh-out-loud funny, as when Brosky recounts hanging backstage with Cat Stevens during a concert at Muhlenberg College Memorial Hall and with Clarence Clemons outside the Roxy Theatre, Northampton, during a Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band concert there.

“Living Here In Allentown” ultimately is a show about redemption in Brosky’s post-clean and sober creativity and marriage to Renate and becoming a stepdad to Lillie.

Kudos to Miller for creating a work of insight and enlightenment, to the actors for their spot-on characterizations, to the musicians for their amazing performances, to stage manager Ginny Wilson for making the show unfold smoothly and to Walt Garvin and the Lehigh Valley Blues Network and Selkie Theatre for producing the show.

“Steve Brosky The Musical: Living Here In Allentown” is a journey of becoming and being. Living is always better than surviving.

“Steve Brosky The Musical: Living Here In Allentown,” 3 p.m. March 13; 8 p.m. March 19, Charles A. Brown Ice House, 56 River St., Sand Island, Bethlehem. Tickets: walt@lvbn.org [6], 484-695-7588