



Warm and embracing story of the Life of Brosky at IceHouse

Published on Monday, 14 March 2016 13:43 | Written by [Ara Barlieb](#)  

At the outset of the performance of 'Steve Brosky, the musical: Living Here in Allentown', playing at The Charles A. Brown IceHouse in Bethlehem, PA, the show's estimable co-writer/director George B. Miller promises that we fans, friends, family, and admirers of the singer-songwriter whose story we will shortly be seeing and hearing will learn "where the music came from and how it came to be."

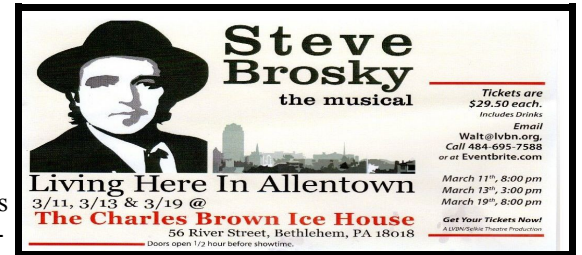
And for the next two and a half hours, that promise is delivered.

No one in regional theatrical circles manages or even attempts to keep more balls in the air at the same time than Mr. Miller.

And to try to tell the life story of an often brilliant, sometimes obstinate, but always entertaining sixty-seven year old musical poet in one show takes an awful lot of balls.

After all, the play is attempting to depict and explain its subject's life from the late 1940s into the mid-1980s, through his childhood, street education, drug dependency and treatment, military combat duty, marriage and parenthood, and the evolution of a lengthy career as a struggling musician in a working class community.

But Miller pulls this juggling act off with such quiet command that one hardly notices the ever looming chance that the whole aerial display of flying, looping story elements that represent Brosky's life could collide, and collapse to the floor and bounce away--- six black-clad actors portraying a wide variety of family, friends, adversaries, and Brosky's own many incarnations from childhood to middle-age; five musicians upstage who not only perform Brosky's better known ballads but also provide steady and colorful background music and sound effects to the action being waged on the floor nearer the audience; five fixed lighting spots in whose harsh light the cast tease the audience with brief dramatized episodes of Brosky's recollections and reflections; a massive wall-size video projection, with a mind of its own, upon which several of Brosky's associates recount their personal memories and experiences with the artist; and perched center stage, the eponymous entertainer himself, his gravelly voice and weary smile guiding us down the often damp and shadowy bakers alleys of his life.



'Steve Brosky, the musical', you need to know, is not and was never intended to be or even to resemble a traditional Broadway-style musical pageant. There is no chorus, no dancing to speak of, no brass (with the exception of one very moving bugle riff late in the show).

Instead, Miller and Brosky have built the production around Brosky performing his own arrangements of his own highly biographical songs.

And the simple, determinedly non-exhibitionistic staging of those performances is sublime. None of the musicians is on his feet. The only movements are literally sure-handed--- the magical Jimmy Meyer on lead guitar, whose fingers seem to undergo mitosis when in full gear; the thumping bass player Suavek Zaniesineko; guest organist, Craig Kastelnik, whose hands hover and wave above his keyboard like a man spinning pizza dough. Even the drummer, the flawless Paco (Wayne Maura), limits his physicality to the job at hand.

And this show is all about the job. Brosky is the quintessential blue-collar artist. His songs describe inner-city neighborhoods, and juvenile delinquency, and shifts at the steel-mill, and housewives, and selective service in Viet Nam, and drinking and carousing at the pub at the end of day.

Perhaps this is why he has endured so long, why he continues to draw audiences, why his story remains touching--- he humbly but unapologetically celebrates the world he has so long inhabited.

Much credit must go to the Cast in Black whose responsibility is to fill in the blanks about Brosky's life, to answer questions that the songs' lyrics address but don't completely explain, including Joshua Tyler Altorfer, Justin Ariola, Thomas Kennebeck, Jeremy Thompson, and Valerie Bittner. Particularly compelling is veteran Jeanie Olah whose economy of graceful, unhurried motion and line deliveries most closely mirrors that of the always testudinal Brosky.

The show will certainly have great meaning and arouse deep emotion in those who have some familiarity with the geography of its Lehigh County setting, and even greater and deeper with those who have had the pleasure of following or accompanying the arc of Brosky's career through the decades depicted.

And, as Miller assured us in his curtain talk, we do indeed learn "where the music came from and how it came to be."

But, throughout the play, there lurks a nagging sense that we don't learn "why" the music came to be, why this clearly gifted and sensitive artist began writing and singing in the first place, why he persists, or, perhaps most importantly, why he created and performed in this compelling play.

To those of us who know him, who've followed him through the years, he has nothing to prove. He stands alone in the region for his gifts and contributions. His work always approaches and often achieves artistic brilliance.

And it's not about the money, he assures us early in the play; the promise of money has always been elusive, even illusory.

In the end, a possible answer does appear. Deeply affected by the closing, hand-clapping finale, "Doing All Right", one leaves the theater thinking that maybe the connection made by applauding along with the artist and his cast and band, maybe this hugging and hand-clasping and exchange of love and admiration between audience and performer--- each for the other--- perhaps this need for gentle, mutual validation, perhaps *this* is why the music, and this play, came to be.