

Is There Life After High School?

Astoria Performing Arts Center

Astoria, NY - October 2003

Reviewed by John Kenrick

Praise be, there's something exciting happening in Queens! If you're looking for some top-notch theatre at an unbeatable price, forget about Times Square. Just hop on the R train or take a quick drive across the Triborough Bridge and check out what's happening at the Astoria Performing Arts Center (APAC). Three years ago this resident company set up shop in the basement of a neighborhood church, and started presenting a fresh mix of plays, musicals, staged readings and cabarets. The resulting buzz wasn't just good -- it was extraordinary.

When APAC announced they were reviving *Is There Life After High School?*, I knew it was time for me to see what all the fuss was about. Born and raised in Astoria, I'm always anxious to see good things happening in the old neighborhood. Adding to that, *Is There Life After High School?* is one of the most underrated musical gems I know. I fell in love with the show when it previewed at the Barrymore Theatre back in 1982. Although the critics dismissed it, I couldn't tell you why. Loosely inspired by Ralph Keyes' best-selling book with the same title, it uses songs and monologues to take a nostalgic look back at the emotional roller coaster known as high school. With an insightful book by Jeffrey Kindley and exquisitely crafted songs by Craig Carnelia, it offers a kaleidoscopic parade of adolescent memories, recalling the joys, terrors, envies, hates and loves that make high school the time of life so many of us "could not forget if we tried."

After more than two decades, the APAC production proved that *Is There Life After High School?* is superb entertainment, as timely as ever. Director/choreographer **Brian Swasey** wisely took a straightforward approach to the staging, keeping the potentially confusing action clearly focused and letting the cast concentrate on making every laugh and emotional wallop in the piece shine through. His simplified staging for "Thousands of Trumpets" turned a problematic number into a bona fide showstopper, and I've rarely seen such a creative use of an environmental stage space. (Watch for this man's name in years to come!) **Tim Saggess'** simple set had plenty of legitimate high school flavor, and **Nicklas Anderson's** lighting was a major asset.

Aside from conducting a flawless performance, musical director **Matt Castle** deserves special credit for pulling together some of the best ensemble singing I have heard on any stage in recent years. Despite the lack of a sound system, every word and every emotion was crisp and clear. Ah, the joy of hearing the unamplified human voice in all its glory -- and I mean really hearing it! Talk about magic.

APAC being an Equity approved showcase, their line-up includes both Equity members and aspiring amateurs, but within a few scenes, it was apparent that the nine performers in *Is There Life After High School?* had extraordinary talent and professional polish. Each one had their share of memorable moments.

Tara Lynn Cotty and **Michael Deleget** scored as mature lovers assuring each other that "I'm Glad You Didn't Know Me" in high school. **Robert McAffrey**, **James Mack** and **Tommy Labanaris** made a handsome comic trio as they deliriously recalled the joys of spending Saturday nights with a six pack of "Beer." There wasn't a dry eye in the house when **Noel Berkofsky** and **Maura Kelly** sang "Fran and Janie," a bittersweet celebration of interrupted friendship. **Stephanie Sine** made each of her monologues a hoot, and bespectacled **Matthew A. Wilson** threatened to steal everything whenever he stepped on stage. His poignant closing bit about what it took to triumph over being taunted as "Joel the Jellyroll" in gym class summed up the whole point of the show -- no matter how high school built s up or tore us apart, what truly matters is what we make of ourselves in the years that follow.

Now here's the kicker -- all of this top level entertainment was to be had for \$15! How's that for a price you can live with? This was only the first show in APAC's 2003-2004 season, which includes an original one-woman musical, Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, an original revue, and a playwright contest. Fellow Queens residents will see me at all of these events -- and smart theatre lovers from other parts of the city will stop by APAC's website for directions. So many people talk about the need for a company like this -- well, here it is kids! Someone is actually doing it! Support this exciting new company, or you'll have no right to complain the next time you're sick of the bloated spectacles dominating Broadway. You'll be doing something good for the theatre, good for New York, and pretty darn enjoyable for yourself too.