

Theatre Review: “Tenderly”
By Kevin M. O’Toole

In 1968, Rosemary Clooney, the fabled 1950's songstress who starred opposite Bing Crosby in the movie “White Christmas,” was performing at a gig in Reno, Nevada. In that tumultuous time, she offered her audience a generous helping of past hits that swung but were no longer in fashion. As she began to warble “Come On-A My House,” she unraveled.

“Tenderly” presents the life of Rosemary Clooney, framed around that 1968 breakdown and her attempts with a psychiatrist to see her way back by revisiting past struggles, glories and disappointments. Weston’s production of this appreciation of her full, flawed life is a triumph. And there are all of those wonderful songs!

“Tenderly” first opened as a two-act musical in 2014 at the Cincinnati Playhouse. Playwrights Mark Friedman and Janet Yates Vogt tweaked the piece for a subsequent production at Showplace Memphis in Tennessee, introducing the character of Bing Crosby and adding some new scenes and songs, including “How About You,” “Mambo Italiano” and “Paper Moon.” According to Producing Director Steve Stettler, Weston’s production represents the authors’ latest revision.

Happily, Susan Haefner, the actress who originated the role of Rosemary Clooney in Cincinnati and starred again in the Memphis production is back at it. For years now, Weston audiences have seen her strut her stuff in a myriad of roles. Last Friday, Haefner did not portray Rosemary Clooney as much as channel the actress/singer’s pluck and desperation to please those around her. Her musical phrasing was crisp and interpretation of this complicated soul touching. When Haefner’s character finally let her guard down, the audience learned what fueled an unlikely path from Maysville, Kentucky, to Hollywood. It was not all roses.

In “Tenderly,” Weston veteran Sam Lloyd, Jr. plays everybody else. Lloyd was convincing as the psychiatrist who talks the star through her troubled past. His malleable face and voice served him well as he was called upon to switch back and forth from doctor to Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, Clooney’s one-time husband Jose Ferrar, her mother and sister, Betty. (Haefner and Lloyd performed a delightful rendition of “Sisters.”) Tim Fort’s skillful direction of these two Weston favorites showed onstage in their great teamwork and trust in one another. Choreographer Felicity Stiverson also mixed in a fox trot here and a soft shoe there.

Scenic Designer Kristen Robinson’s antiseptic hospital office set included blinds that opened to reveal Music Director Jeffrey Lodin on piano, John Convertino on string bass and Andrew Gillum on drums. Those cats can play. Costumer Barbara Bell’s dresses and especially the coiffed wigs for the character of Rosemary Clooney were spot on. A flowing gown, overlarge glasses and layered hairdo fully displayed Clooney in her later years as the reinvented interpreter of smooth jazz.

Weston’s production of “Tenderly” was not light fare, but a full, sumptuous meal that informed, entertained and, finally, inspired.

Performances of “Tenderly” continue at WPTC’s alternative stage at the air-conditioned Weston Rod and Gun Club through August 5. For ticket information, call the WPTC box office at (802) 824-5288 or visit its website at www.westonplayhouse.org.