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ON STAGE: True Selves

Ensemble closes the year with fun drag queen musical

By Ted Mills, News-Press Correspondent
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THE LEGEND OF GEORGIA MCBRIDE

When: Through Dec. 23. 8 p.m. Weds - Sats., 2 and 7 p.m. Sunday. Added show 4 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 15

Where: The New Vic, 33 E. Victoria

Cost: \$60 - \$75

Information: etscb.org or (805) 965-5400

"This has been fun for me, because I suffered through high heels through all of my youth," says director Jenny Sullivan, "And now these guys not only have to walk in them, they have to dance in them."

The shoe is definitely on the other foot in "The Legend of Georgia McBride," currently running through Dec. 23 at the New Vic. The musical comedy follows down-on-his-luck entertainer Casey (played by Stephen Spencer) whose Elvis impersonation show isn't bringing in the audiences that it promised to in this Florida panhandle town. When he meets an aging drag queen, and with a baby on the way at home and a wife to support, Casey has to swap one camp impersonation for something completely different.

Matthew Lopez' play premiered at the Denver Center for the Performing Arts in 2015. Sullivan heard about it when the third production of the play hit the Geffen Theatre. She caught the last show and wish she had been able to see it again. Instead, she got to direct it when Ensemble Theatre's Jonathan Fox asked her to direct it this season.

"You don't get how wonderful it is until you actually see it," she said. On paper it sounds interesting, she said, "but you really don't know how fun it is."

Sullivan's prop designer John McElveney performs drag so he is doing double duty keeping the drag queens in the show

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Bill Brochtrup stars in the Ensemble Theatre Company production of "The Legend of Georgia McBride," directed by Jenny Sullivan. JEANNE TRANNER PHOTO



Keiana Richard and Stephen Michael Spencer star in the Ensemble Theatre Company production of "The Legend of Georgia McBride" at the new Ensemble Theatre.

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authentic. Choreographer Jamie Torcellini knows the world too.

"It's a hard thing to do in a quick period of time," Sullivan says, so it's good to have a small group keeping things one hundred.

"It's very much a play about transformation," says lead actor Spencer. "We experience through all five characters a bit of evolution of humanity into a new part of their lives. For a play rooted in comedic elements it has an enormous amount of heart in it."



Stephen Michael Spencer, Carlton Byrd, Bill Brochtrup and J. Stephen Brantley perform a scene from "The Legend of Georgia McBride."

By playing a larger-than-life character, they discover their true selves, he says. And like his character, Spencer got a crash course in drag.

"The idea of being able to shed yourself and go out in front of an audience and be who you want to be," says Spencer, "There's a similar quality in being an actor. I love make-believe. I'm a detective of human empathy. I want to experience emotions that I might not experience in real life."

"There's much more to this than sparkles and feather boas," he says. Spencer researched by attending drag shows in San Diego where he spends a lot of time. Every show has a different clientele, he says. "It's such a supportive community."

Rounding out the cast is Bill Brochtrup, J. Stephen Brantley, Carlton Byrd, and Keiana Rich rd.

"Every time I start a play, you develop and create a very intense family for a brief amount of time," Sullivan says. "And there's such a thing in drag. There's the rules of the game, there's collaboration, sharing, bitchiness, it's just a microcosm of the theatrical world."

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Local News
Business
Celebrations
Columnists
Life
Sports
Scene

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Opinions & Letters
Obituaries
Travel

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Announcements
Merchandise
Garage Sales
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