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Songs for a New World (Rubicon Theater Company; 140 seats; \$48 top)

A Rubicon Theater Company presentation of a musical in two acts, with music and lyrics by Jason Robert Brown. Directed by Jon Lawrence Rivera. With: Joan Almedilla, Cindy Benson, Anthony Manough, Kevin Odekirk.

By JOEL HIRSCHHORN

The Rubicon has taken the title of Jason Robert Brown's four-character musical literally, converting its theater into the Santa Maria Cafe, a new world with servers, sofas, coffee tables and chairs. This altered environment by set designer Trefoni Michael Rizzi, projecting European charm and collegiate congeniality, encourages the illusion that we know the actors personally and share similar problems. The sense of camaraderie is enhanced as the stars smile, touch and talk to spectators while singing of love, loss, fear, rejection and thwarted dreams. There's no traditional book, but director Jon Lawrence Rivera has organized and linked together Brown's witty numbers so the characters feel firmly connected. Four dynamic Broadway veterans handle the material, markedly different types who form a surprisingly seamless ensemble. Their explosive harmonies bring intensity to the much-utilized title tune and a rock gospel number, "The River Won't Flow," as well as a climactic rouser, "Hear My Song." Rivera's quartet consists of the demure Joan Almedilla (Kim in Broadway's "Miss Saigon"), boyishly clean-cut Kevin Odekirk (Marius in Gotham's "Les Miserables"), Anthony Manough, a virile cross between Peabo Bryson and James Ingram (Simba in Broadway's "The Lion King") and confrontationally comedic Cindy Benson (Mme. Thenardier in "Les Miz"). Benson is an arresting, no-holds-barred performer, and she barrels into songs with terrifying commitment. As Mrs. Santa Claus, who feels rejected by her husband's worldwide holiday treks, she initially suggests Marlene Dietrich on speed, then fragments hilariously before our eyes while screaming, "Nick, take me with you!" Her rendition of a suicidal wife in "Just One Step" is the kind of brassily ethnic showstopper Barbra Streisand would have done in her "Funny Girl" days; Benson's protest "I'm not gonna kvetch," as she contemplates her bloody corpse splattered across Fifth Avenue, is a hair-raising piece of theater. Odekirk presents an innocent face and unthreatening persona, but he has an aptitude for conveying neurosis that surfaces with the philosophical "She Cries," a penetrating number that warns men who want to extricate themselves from relationships to leave before a woman weakens their resolve with tears. Just as compelling is his interpretation of "The World Was Dancing," a study of romantic indecision. As he rushes around the room, Odekirk executes Kitty McNamee's choreography naturally and with style. Manough's moves are equally exciting, especially an unexpected split on a table top, and for sheer emotion, it's hard to beat his version of "Flying Home." He's a ruggedly convincing convict in "King of the World," mourning his lost freedom yet refusing to concede defeat. An understated contrast to the other principals, Almedilla sings with impeccable purity. Her golden notes lend depth to "I'm Not Afraid of Anything," declaring her courage to face "mountains, dragons, dark and sky ... Tell me where's the challenge if you never try." There's another major contributor, pianist Brent Crayon, offering such virtuoso accompaniment that he sets toes tapping compulsively. The real star, however, is composer Brown, frequently compared to Sondheim but in truth a composer with a strongly identifiable voice of his own.

Sets, Trefoni Michael Rizzi; costumes, Jim Bobby; lighting, Steven Young; sound, Drew Dalzell; production stage manager, Andrea Lovino; choreography, Kitty McNamee; musical direction, Brent Crayon. Opened March 5, 2005; reviewed March 20; runs through April 10. Running time: 1 HOUR and 45 MIN.

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