

'Songs' full of laughter, tears

Anytime Michelle Cheney comes to town and performs at the Palace Theatre, the audience is in for a special treat.

I'm talking about an award-winning comedienne and songstress who loves to do musical theater and comedy, one who usually lands a leading role in whatever and wherever she performs.

The good, the funny and the heartwarming Ms. Cheney performs her new one-woman cabaret show of love songs and not-so-lovey love songs from the stage and the classic songbooks, plus a story and parody or two, in cabaret form. Michelle is supported on the piano by the renowned musician and songwriter, her friend, David Blackburn.

Mr. Blackburn proudly told me, "Michelle and I have



PETE'S PICKS

Peter Dossing

worked together for about 10 years now. Previously, I worked on cruise ships as a musical director and conductor, putting together cabaret and other shows. It was a great job. I got to see the world, but I never

Songs in the Key of Love



Red Poppy rating: 4.5 out of 5

worked harder in my life. We'd start early in the morning and go past midnight, pretty much. We would work six months and then we would get six weeks off, and yes, we had lots of free lunches!"

David continued, "Michelle and I have been working on this show for about four months and we'd get together a couple of times per week. The show would evolve and I'd find a new arrangement of something. We would take songs that are popular and then come up with newer ways to do it, new arrangements. Together, we created a heartwarming

look at what and who we love."

I told him that many of their songs I didn't recognize, but I thought I've heard them before.

He replied, "That's exactly the way it should be."

Michelle commented after the show, "When Mary Ellen Butler (Palace artistic director) asked me to do love songs, like Valentine songs, there are always the smarmy, kind of traditional songs. Well, there is some humor and so many ways to play love songs. My thing is really comedy, that's what I really like to do. Yeah. That's my deal, comedy. So, it's kind of fun to take people on that ride, I like (Jimmy Shubert) comedy and then music that touches your heart."

Michelle told me that, "I wanted to bring stories about my mother, a little thing about

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Photos courtesy of Rachel Middleton Brittain

Michelle Cheney will perform "Songs in the Key of Love" at the Palace Playhouse in Georgetown. The show's run ends February 19.

Last chance to hear 'Songs'

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my father, little animals and about friendship, the comedy about loving yourself, and how ridiculous that can be. So, I did that in the opening of Act II. In cabaret, you bring bits of yourself into it, but also leave some mystery so as not to give a lot of it away. Cabaret shouldn't be crude and just out there, I don't think that's necessary. There's a certain element of being a lady that you need to maintain."

Ms. Cheney and Mr. Blackburn included some of the classic songs from Sondheim, Kander and Ebb, favorites of the 1930s, 40s and 50s and much, much more. There are some songs from Cole Porter, and Rogers and Hammerstein.

Popular pieces included, "I'll Be Seeing You," "You're Getting to be a Habit with Me," "Just the Way You Look Tonight," "When in Spain," and "Arthur in the Afternoon," just to name a few of their arrangements. She would easily transition from one song to another and sur-

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Michelle Cheney
Singer

prise the audience.

I had a chance to speak with a friend of Michelle's who came from Austin to see her. Wendy Zavalaga also got a chance to sing a duet with Michelle on stage.

Afterwards she told me, "They first met at an audition at the Palace. Actually we were in the *Sound of Music* together. I was Maria, and she was the scheming Baroness Elsa Schraeder. Michelle is so funny, but her heart is so big, she is just a wonderful human being. Michelle treats people and her friends so well. I just love her, can't say enough about her. She is my 'bestie' (best friend)."

Ms. Cheney has performed in theaters in and around Austin, focusing on

musical theater and comedy. She is the recipient of several B. Iden Payne nominations and awards, and was named *Austin Entertainment Weekly's* "Best Actress in a Musical" for 2015.

Glamorous and hilarious, her witty one-woman cabaret "Songs in the Key of Love" is the perfect show for date night, girls' night, or any night! Experience the intimate setting of the Palace Playhouse where the entertainment is up close. Reach out and touch someone.

The Palace Playhouse is directly across the street from Georgetown's Palace Theatre; Performances are Friday and Saturday at 7:30 p.m.; Sunday evening, February 19, 6:30 p.m. Tickets for all performances are \$28 for general seating. Run time is just under one hour and 45 minutes including intermission.

Peter Dassing is a recovering stand-up comedian who was captivated by the theater at a very early age and especially enjoys community theater productions. He can be reached at society@willcosun.com.