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Youthful romance musically flourishes in 'Rooms'

By PETER SANTILLI, Associated Press Writer
Monday, March 16, 2009

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(03-16) 15:19 PDT New York (AP) --

It's a sound formula for fun musical theater — rock 'n' roll with an edge, youthful romance and fresh comedy performed with an exaggerated Scottish brogue.

You'll find these elements and more in Paul Scott Goodman's delightful "Rooms: a rock romance," which opened Monday at off-Broadway's New World Stages.

Goodman's lively, narrative-infused score manages to be lyrical, clever and even poignant — all without taking itself too seriously. And his tuneful songs are bolstered by a promising two-person cast and a capable backing band.

Fast-rising star Leslie Kritzer is positively ebullient as Monica, an energetic, stardom-craving singer who dreams of performing in all the world's most famous rooms.

The role seems an excellent fit for the talented Kritzer, whose Broadway credits include "A Catered Affair" and "Legally Blonde." Her lovely, versatile voice and natural flair for comedy make her the linchpin of this production.

Kritzer quickly establishes a playful, lasting rapport with the audience and displays an obvious chemistry with her co-star, Doug Kreeger, who plays Monica's sulking partner, Ian.

A reclusive, enigmatic drinker, Ian is Monica's perfect counterpart. He wants nothing more than to be left alone in his darkened room with his bottle and guitar.

But Monica won't have it.

The love affair begins sometime in the late-1970s in their hometown, Glasgow, Scotland, where they collaborate writing songs and play local gigs in total obscurity. After winning a trip to London in a battle-of-the-bands contest, the rockers are swept up in a whirlwind of Scotch whisky, black leather and raucous concerts that leads them to the New York punk scene, where they ride a hit song all the way to the top of the charts.

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But somewhere along their rapid ascent, the two discover success isn't what they expected it to be.

Kreeger originated the role of Ian in the show's previous incarnation — a co-production of MetroStage in Alexandria, Va., and Geva Theatre Center in Rochester, N.Y., that stemmed from a showcase in the 2005 New York Musical Theatre Festival.

Under the direction of Scott Schwartz, another carry-over from the previous production, the New World Stages version of "Rooms" has the look and feel of a show that has been honed smartly over time.

The performers' slightest movements and expressions are replete with purpose and nuance, making them a pleasure to watch.

A simple wood door mounted on wheels rolls elegantly across the stage, signaling smooth transitions from one scene to the next. Herrick Goldman's lighting provides subtle, effective accents.

The cast is accompanied nicely by a partially visible, five-piece band perched above Adam Koch's darkly urban set — a sparse, utilitarian blend of exposed brick and scaffolds.

Goodman, who was born and raised in Glasgow, is perhaps best-known for his successful musical adaptation of the Jay McInerney novel, "Bright Lights, Big City."

But that could change as this new production of "Rooms" is sure to raise further the stature of this talented composer.

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