

# This Whiskey blend's a bit rough

## THEATRE

REBECCA CALDWELL

### Whiskey Serenade

Written by Ralph Small  
and Mitchell Kitz

Directed by Eli Lukawitz

Starring Jennifer Gould, Samuel  
Owen and Drew Carnwath

At the Toronto Centre for the Arts

Rating: ★½

There's a line in *Whiskey Serenade*, the new musical written by Ralph Small and Mitchell Kitz, where a scheming journalist remarks how fact and fiction come together to offer a new form of the truth.

You only wish the playwright and composer had listened to him and blended the two a little more before they'd put it on stage. While the show has a great premise based on a surprising part of Canadian history, ultimately the script is a little too rough to go down smooth.

The play opens in 1930, with gawkers clamouring to catch a glimpse of mob boss Bessie Starkman's body during her funeral. David Rogers, The Toronto Star reporter who'd profiled the king and queen of Hamilton's bootlegging in the past, is now hounding the widower for the inside story of Bessie's life and death.

Through flashbacks, the audience learns how Bessie's early life as a destitute immigrant changes with a chance meeting with then-equally pitiful Rocco Peri. Abandoning her husband and daughters, Bessie and Rocco team up and run booze into the U.S., eventually operating a crime ring that rivalled Al Capone's.

Although a bit thin as the mousy immigrant in the first half, Jennifer Gould's Bessie is terrific once she's transformed into the wanton mobster queen, alluringly determined and strong. As Rocco, Samuel Owen nails the broody sentimentality of the grieving gangster, but, like the Bessie character, the earlier befuddled Rocco is shallow, making the metamorphoses to cold-blooded mob boss seem unreal.

Drew Carnwath, last seen in the Fringe hit *Top Gun! The Musical*, is great as Rogers, physically capturing the ticks and tricks of the reedy, greedy journalist on the make.

The problem with the character

lies in the script — he's the only one who addresses the audience, essentially acting as a type of narrator. But since he only starts speaking well after the first musical number, his presence comes as a shock.

And while his asides are often humorous, they're a little awkward in conjunction with the rest of the cast and the way the production has already started to unfold.

The songs, particularly the ballads, lean toward the flat side, partially because — aside from Gould — many of the singers lack the vocal strength to pull off solos. Tunes such as the mournful minor-key *Zaida's Song* are musically interesting but too sentimental to be really effective. The big standout is the moody and sexy *Whiskey Serenade*, gorgeously sung by a gorgeous Alison Smith playing call girl Mary Ashley.

The ensemble pieces fare much better. *From Belleville to Cuba* is simply silly fun that has the cast moving in waves of unison across the stage. *Let It Roll*, the first-act closer, is the best number. Set in Bessie and Rocco's roaring speak-easy, the song's a big bad embrace of the criminal lifestyle. The ensemble, in wonderful costumes, rips through some great choreography by Dave Campbell.

In fact, *Let It Roll* is so good, it doesn't deserve the constant interruptions — the spoken scenes that act like non-musical verses, only to flip back to the song's chorus. The number stops at least twice, adding such informational expositions as how Rocco and Bessie told customs officials they pretended to ship their booze to Cuba instead of the United States since the excise tax was 1-per-cent lower.

One of the toughest parts of a musical is keeping up the tempo: the songs can make the dialogue feel slow. At 2½ hours, *Whiskey Serenade* feels longer. Director Eli Lukawitz stops the action cold with some scenes, notably the second-act clockwatcher where two mobsters discuss dissension in the ranks. Adding bits of the women's suffragette movement as mere backdrop is also unnecessarily distracting.

Sometimes too much fact can spoil the fiction.

*Whiskey Serenade* continues at the Toronto Centre for the Arts Studio Theatre to Nov. 23. For information: 416-870-8000.