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Review: The Gloria Estefan musical ‘On Your Feet!’ is a full-on blast at Drury Lane



Gaby Albo in “On Your Feet!” at Drury Lane Theatre in Oakbrook Terrace. (Justin Barbin)



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The ebullient jukebox musical celebrating Gloria Estefan and the Miami Sound Machine burst with life Wednesday night at the Drury Lane Theatre in Oakbrook Terrace, a fabulous locally produced explosion of the 2015 Broadway musical featuring such hits as “Rhythm is Gonna Get You,” “Anything for You,” “Can’t Stay Away From You” and “Words Get In the Way.”

Nothing gets in the way of the good times here. Nada. This suburban operation has raised its game, and opened its purse, for this one.

When I say locally produced, I should note that this production draws heavily from the touring production of the musical, which [had its tryout in Chicago](#) in the summer of 2015, one of many brought here by the director Jerry Mitchell, this time in concert with the choreographer Sergio Trujillo.

I have fond memories of that experience: [I got to spend time](#) with Gloria and Emilio Estefan as they met the cast and hung out in both New York and Chicago and I was struck by their insistence during the creative process that the bio musical didn’t treat them as saints (the book is by Alexander Dinelaris), despite their fundamental decency and warmth in a notoriously ego-driven business.

There is nothing in “On Your Feet!” to radically rewrite the rules of the jukebox musical. It’s the usual story of humble early lives, family struggles, fights with the suits at the record companies who are not letting the Estefans do their crossover thing, and the difficulty of maintaining life on the road. But it also had some uncommon assets.

In March 1990 in the Poconos, the Estefans' tour bus was part of a multi-vehicle accident that fractured Gloria's spine; she had to endure many months of painful rehabilitation just to get on her feet again. Like a lot of Estefan's fans in 1990, I remember the news crawl of a cable news network erroneously announcing her death in the accident (there was bad initial police information and the mistake sent her fans and family into a panic). On the day I was at rehearsal for the show, one of the kids in the production, meeting Gloria Estefan, asked her if she was "really in a bus crash," and I watched her flinch, decades later. So that is a compelling story.

Unlike a lot of jukebox musicals, "On Your Feet!" has the benefit of being composed mostly of music that invites dance, which always helps. Aside from the power of the recovery story and the uncommon wit and frankness of the book, Estefan just has so many hits, recorded over a career that spanned decades, and they're cleverly slotted into the story. The thesis of the show is that the Estefans' fusion of Latin rhythm and American pop — horns and Cuban rhythms laid down on top of Anglo-American guitars and keyboards (or, as the show calls it, "rice and beans and hamburger") — changed not only their lives but the music industry.

They make their case here and it's a big pleasure to hear them do so again, a decade later for me and as performed by a young cast.

The new production, directed and choreographed by Luis Salgado and starring Gaby Albo (a veteran of this title) as Gloria and Samuel Garnica as Emilio, has lots of fresh visual ideas and the talents of the famed Chicago videographer Mike Tutaj, who uses archival footage of the Estefans here a part of a really vibrant set from Clifton Chadick that is scaled just slightly too large for the Drury Lane stage, which is exactly what you want with a title that it supposed to burst off the performance space. This is not the first "On Your Feet!" for many of the people involved here and there are not many locally based performers in the show. Still, I thought this production made its own case for the show. Both Albo and Garnica are a blast to watch, as is Claudia Quesada, the Cuban-born, Chicago-based actor playing Gloria Estefan's mother.

Salgado's choreography just never stops and is very impressively executed. Indeed, everything about this fast-paced "On Your Feet!" is impressive, thankfully including the sound reinforcement; it's one of the most successful shows I've seen in this theater over the last 25 years, due in no small part to its confidence, competence and, most importantly, a clear identity in terms of what it wants to be, say and do in the hear and now. Plus, this is a smaller theater than the venues downtown so it's a more intimate experience, especially when it comes to those killer power ballads.

Needless to say, then, if you are a fan of the Estefans and the Miami Sound Machine, you'll have a total blast. Plenty of reason to go again if you were there the first time.

Chris Jones is a Tribune critic.

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Review: "On Your Feet!" (4 stars)

When: Through March 22

Where: Drury Lane Theatre, 100 Drury Lane, Oakbrook Terrace

Running time: 2 hours, 20 mins.