

Smokin' at 'Smokey Joe's Cafe'

Packed with pop standards by Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller blended with Taiwanese flavors, Brooke Hall's version of Broadway's longest running music revue tests performers to their limits

BY DIANE BAKER
STAFF REPORTER

Brooke Hall came up with the idea of putting on *Smokey Joe's Cafe* in Taiwan a few years ago. The choreographer and director, who came to Taiwan seven years ago, saw the revue as the perfect show both for Taiwanese performers interested in American musical theater and for local audiences.

He already had some experience in helping stage a English-language musical in Taipei, having been the choreographer for *I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change* at the Crown Theater (皇冠藝文中心小劇場) in November 2007. He had also built a reputation in Taiwan as a dancer and director, adding to a US resume that included performing in dozens of musicals in New York, regional theaters and national tours.

Smokey Joe's Cafe or *SJC* as Hall calls it, debuted in Los Angeles in 1984 and hit Broadway the following year. The original Broadway cast soundtrack won a Grammy Award in 1995 and the show ran for 2,036 performances. It's based on rock 'n' roll and R 'n' B songs written by Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, whose myriad hits for artists such as The Drifters, The Coasters, Peggy Lee and Elvis Presley in the 1950s and 1960s included *Hound Dog*, *Jailhouse Rock*, *Spanish Harlem*, *Love Potion No. 9* and *I'm a Woman*.

"*SJC* is one of those rare shows that makes it appeal to a wide selection of audiences. It has rock music to appeal to those who don't usually appreciate musicals. It has dance for those who get bored listening to singing. It is light and energetic and upbeat. It has a boy-band style aspect that appeals to fans of current boy bands," Hall wrote in a prospectus for sponsors for the show.

Originally, Hall envisioned doing *Smokey Joe's* just as a showcase at the tiny Guling Street Avant-Garde Theater (特爾街小劇場).

Cedric Alviani of Infine Art and Culture Exchange, one of the producers, said that as his team and Hall talked about doing the show, it became clear that they needed to make more of a splash.

"The more we talked, we decided to move to a slightly bigger theater, hoping to find sponsors for an even bigger show," Alviani said. "We hope this can travel [around] Taiwan in the future."

"I realized that if I was going to do this, I had to go full-out," Hall said.

While the four shows next weekend at the 500-seat National Taiwan Arts Education Center (國立台灣藝術教育館) theater will be performed in English with Chinese subtitles, Hall has made some changes to cater to local tastes.

"Originally *SJC* didn't have much of a story, but people in Taiwan said 'You have to have a story,' so I have added story so we know who they [the characters] are and where they are. I added some romance because the blues aren't called the blues for nothing. So now we'll see a young couple and their problems," Hall said at a press conference at Guling Street theater last month.

He also played around with the song list to make the storyline clearer and beefed up the cast. The original show had nine performers, but Hall has 13, along with a six-piece band and conductor.

"A lot of people ask me if you can find performers talented enough [in Taiwan] and I think you will see we have people as talented as those in New York, so when I hear 'Taiwan[ese] people



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can't, I want to say 'you can,'" he said.

There maybe some familiar faces, including a few from *I Love You*, but almost everyone had to go through the full audition process, something Hall said was not common in Taiwan. He posted audition notices on university bulletin boards and on Facebook and talked to theater companies. Applicants had to choose one of four songs to perform for their audition; in the end about 80 people tried out.

"I ran it like a New York audition, with a panel of judges ... I had callbacks, taught dance combos, did some acting exercises, then partnered people. I picked the best people I could. I kept having auditions until I found who I wanted," Hall said.

The cast started rehearsals in October. In mid-November, however, Hall decided to make a change, dropping one cast member and adding jazz singer Mandy Gaines (who didn't audition).

Cincinnati, Ohio-native Gaines first gained a modicum of fame in Taiwan as the lead singer of the MIT band and as a DJ on ICRT's AM station in the late 1980s and early 1990s before returning to the US to focus on a jazz career. MIT released two CDs and toured college and university campuses around the country, while Gaines also recorded with Emil Chow (周華健) and performed with Harlem Yu (庾澄慶).

Since the mid-1990s she has developed an annual circuit that sees her performing at jazz clubs and festivals in Brussels, Paris, Helsinki, Singapore and Bangkok, as well as at Brown Sugar in Taipei. By joining the *Smokey Joe's* cast, Gaines returned to her roots, having studied musical theater in college and performed in shows in Ohio.

"It's kind of a full circle moment as far as I'm concerned," she said, although she admitted she had some catching up to do.

"The biggest challenge is that I haven't done musical theater for a long time, so it's a switch of hats from just being a singer-entertainer to acting as well," she said.

But Gaines wasn't the only one who found *Smokey Joe's* daunting. The big dance number — *Baby That's Rock 'n' Roll*, which is performed by five couples and a sixth man — calls for some very energetic singers.

Hall said the first time the cast saw the number they said: "You want us to do that and dance?"

"I love to challenge people," he said with a big smile.

Judging by last month's press conference, Hall and his cast were well on their way to meeting his challenge.

PERFORMANCE NOTES:

WHAT: Smokey Joe's Cafe

WHEN: Jan. 16 and Jan. 17 at 7:30pm, matinees on Jan. 17 and Jan. 18 at 2:30pm

WHERE: National Taiwan Arts Education Center (國立台灣藝術教育館本部及演藝廳), 47 Nanhai Rd, Taipei City (台北市南海路47號)

TICKETS: NT\$500, NT\$700 and NT\$900,

available at Eslite bookstores, NTCH ticketing

(www.artsticket.com.tw) or by calling

(02) 2742-3595 for English-language booking

or (02) 3393-9888 for Mandarin booking.

The lines are open Monday through

Friday from 10am to 6pm