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Theater

'Rooms' With a View Of Young Punk Love

By Peter Marks

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"Rooms" is an appealing relationship rock-musical that establishes, once and for all, that Scotland is for tortured lovers.

The brainchild of Glasgow-born composer Paul Scott Goodman and his wife, book writer Miriam Gordon, the 90-minute show -- in a world premiere engagement at MetroStage in Alexandria -- hits the pleasurable high notes in the stormy affair of a stage-struck young Scottish woman and a brooding Glasgow guitarist, with whom she plots an all-out charisma assault on the music industry.

Although an audience can recognize from miles away what's coming in this backstage romance -- the musical owes more than a passing nod to, of all things, "Funny Girl" -- Goodman's witty punk-rock parodies and power ballads stamp the musical with an engaging personality all its own. He's helped by the effervescent ministrations of a director, Scott Schwartz, who effectively flips a switch on his actors, Natascia Diaz and Doug Kreeger, that allows their natural electricity to flow.

The production splices together 17 numbers and economical amounts of dialogue to tell the story of Diaz's Monica P. Miller, a Jewish girl from the suburbs who has enough nerve to give Bette Midler a run for her chutzpah. She's described, in point of fact, as "Glasgow's answer to Barbra Streisand," and her starry-eyed fever dreams are chronicled in the infectious "Bring the Future Faster," a pounding pop response to "Don't Rain on My Parade."

The time is the mid-to-late 1970s, when punk rock happens to be the music phenomenon of the moment in worlds-away London. Young Monica, a budding singer-lyricist, has a meet-cute encounter in the Glasgow home of Kreeger's Ian Wallace, who's reclusive, down on himself and handsome. (This is musical theater-land, after all.) Ian has a gift for melody and, stoked by Monica's ferocious need for attention, emerges from his shell -- and vodka-by-the-bottleful haze -- just enough to become her unreliable partner in a punk act called the Diabolicals, which will take them to more cosmopolitan locales.

Given the very familiar opposites-attract tensions in the story, Goodman and Gordon are wise to compress the banter wherever possible and let the band play on. (The five onstage



Natascia Diaz and Doug Kreeger as musicians whose paths cross in 1970s Glasgow, leading to rock and romance. (Van Hill Entertainment/metrostage)

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musicians, conducted by Jenny Cartney, ably amplify the satisfying score.) And while there's an undeniable curiosity value to the exotic convergence of Jewishness and Scottishness, Monica is dialed up to a rather difficult-to-digest level of adorableness when we're introduced to her. That makes it a bit tougher to believe in a disaffected type such as Ian falling so hard so fast, or in the rapid transition of Monica from Broadway aspirant to imitator of the Clash.



Goodman does provide a foundation early on for a mischievous streak in Monica: Her first collaboration with Ian is a song for a Glasgow bat mitzvah, and what they come up with -- "Scottish Jewish Princess" -- is cheekily inappropriate for the occasion.

The musical picks up speed after it lands Monica and Ian in London, and the composer gets to indulge his penchant for parody with the Diabolicals' surprise punk hit, "All I Want Is Everything." (You might lament that "Rooms" doesn't spend more time in an inspired evocation of

this bygone period.) In the tradition of ladder-climbing showbiz stories, we move on to the next town, New York, and, of course, the inevitable romantic complications and anguishing forks in the road.

The intimacy of MetroStage's little theater seems just right for "Rooms," which falls somewhere between cabaret and conventional musical. Adam Koch's set consists almost entirely of a door on wheels, which the actors roll into place to denote the many public and private spaces in which "Rooms" plays out. It's a show that seems to revel in its portability and, as such, will no doubt find receptive houses elsewhere. (This production departs Alexandria in September for Geva Theatre in Rochester, N.Y.)

Diaz -- seen in these parts most recently in Signature Theatre's "Kiss of the Spider Woman" -- does an excellent job of bringing out the charm in what could be a bulldozer of a character, successfully taking Monica from youthful irascibility to a more womanly warmth. As a result, the evening's climax raises the mandatory lump in the throat. Vocally, she is a supple match for the impressive Kreeger, who allows us to believe in Ian's passions and his weaknesses. Both are woven into his rendition of Ian's intense, cathartic anthem, "Fear of Flying."

All those assets, the production entertainingly puts on display -- along with a couple of pretty decent Scottish accents.

Rooms, music and lyrics by Paul Scott Goodman, book by Goodman and Miriam Gordon. Directed by Scott Schwartz. Music direction and orchestrations, Jesse Vargas; choreography, Matt Williams; costumes, Alejo Vietti; lighting, Herrick Goldman; sound, Daniel Erdberg; dialect adviser, Doug Honorof. About 90 minutes. Through Sept. 7 at MetroStage, 1201 N. Royal St., Alexandria. Call 800-494-8497 or visit <http://www.metrostage.org>.

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