

Backstage Pass

INSIGHTS ON STAGE, SCREEN AND BEYOND

‘John & Jen:’ Packed With Nostalgia and Important Messages



THEATER REVIEW

By **KRISTEN FIORE**
Daily Sun Senior Writer

Click, click. Yellowy light switches on and off to reveal an attic-like room with a large

trunk and mismatched chairs and end tables. Big Polaroid-style photos of different scenes from life hang in the backdrop, overlapping each other.

This is the setup for Tom Greenwald and Andrew Lipka’s “John & Jen,” the first show of season four at The Studio Theatre Tierra del Sol.

Out runs Jen (played by Kelly Morris Rowan), followed by her younger brother, John (played by Craig Smith). The story follows their relationship against the backdrop of ‘50s to ‘90s America.

In childhood, they are extremely close, vowing to protect each other from their abusive father, who John also can’t help but idolize.

But like any siblings, the onset of hormones cause little rifts and annoyances.

Differing beliefs and lifestyles put even more of a strain on the relationship. Jen goes away to college and joins the counterculture movement. And when she comes back with



Submitted photo

The musical “John & Jen” recently opened at The Studio Theatre Tierra del Sol and will run until Oct. 27.

unwashed hair and a fringed hippie vest to find John clean-cut, stiff and military-bound, the two taunt each other.

Years later, Jen’s son, also

named John and also played by Smith, has a strained relationship with his mother, who is overly protective and can’t help but see her relationship

with her son as a do-over of the relationship she had with her brother.

As Jen says, “Flower children of the ‘60s, fascist parents of the ‘80s.”

“John & Jen” is told almost entirely through song, and Morris Rowan and Smith do a great job, along with live musicians Gary Powell, Jerry Bruno and Ryan Loeckel.

The songs are catchy and move the story along in a creative and fluid way. (e.g., “Talk Show,” a number in which John and Jen communicate their difference via passive-aggressive talk show.)

There also are plenty of costume changes to communicate the passage of time, and these are done with impressive speed and grace.

I think anybody who has siblings or perhaps family

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members with different beliefs or lifestyles will not only be able to relate to this show, but learn from it.

“John & Jen” fits The Studio’s Season 4 theme of reaching across the political divide by stressing the importance of not losing your close relationships to opposing beliefs.

A lot of audience members also found it relatable because the setting of the show also is the setting in which they grew up and raised their own children.

“It’s excellent. I’m enjoying it a lot,” said Mary Ortquist, of the Village of Sanibel, during the show’s intermission. “We’re from that era, so it brings back a lot of memories and thoughts. We were just discussing families and about how some kids follow one parent and some the other, and it tears them apart.”

Karen Willner, of the Village of Hillsborough, said she was enjoying the show because it has a lot of substance.

“It’s very creative in the way that they are taking us through the history of two children,” Willner said. “I think it’s very smoothly done, especially with the creative costume changes.”

At the end of the show, Willner met my eye, nodded in approval and said, “Well, they didn’t hold back!”

And they sure didn’t. The cast and crew put everything they had into this show, from the energy on stage to the storytelling communicated through changes of lighting.

Catch this show if you can. It runs at The Studio Theatre until Oct. 27. Tickets are \$40 and can be purchased online at thevillagesentertainment.com or at any Villages Box Office location.