

# FESTIVAL ANTIGONISH

*'refreshingly original and invigorating'*

## Joni: a must-see production

By Ron Foley Macdonald • Aliant.net • July 19, 2005

Festival Antigonish Summer Theatre is branching out this year with a **sparkling theatrical presentation** consisting of almost thirty songs by one of Canada's—and the world's—most distinctive female songwriters. *Joni Mitchell: River*, created by Allen MacInnis and Greg Lowe, is a **fascinating staging of the work of the great prairie tunesmith**, musician and painter.

For fans of Joni Mitchell, *River* is a **must-see production**. For those less familiar with her work, the show is a **fabulous introduction to songs of the most influential of all confessional singer/songwriters**. While it's not exactly a collection of greatest hits—there's a couple of key works missing, including *The Circle Game* and *In France They Kiss On Main Street*—this is a production that **lovingly explores the essence of Joni Mitchell's extraordinary artistry**.

With no dramatic plot and only few thematic threads in which to organize the material, *River* strays very far from similar theatrical presentations of other Canadian Songwriter's works. Several shows based on Leonard Cohen's songwriting, for example, dramatize his songs to a ludicrous degree, wringing all sorts of emotion from material that was delivered—by Leonard himself on his original recordings—in his famously dry, restrained monotone.

*Joni Mitchell: River* avoids this theatrical trap. Director Jean Morpurgo wisely reflects Joni Mitchell's steely discipline in the delivery of the show. Consequently, the three actors—Raquel Duffy, Mark Uhre and Margot Sampson—and two musicians (Dave Carmichael and David Christensen) tend to play down the emotions in the songs.

What Morpurgo and her cast play up, however, is the stunning poetry of the songs and Mitchell's own breathtaking musical settings. Fans of Joni already know of the **astounding originality and complexity of her work which is faithfully and powerfully rendered by the show**. Guitarist Carmichael, for example, must change guitars for almost every selection to correctly reproduce the complicated tunings, rhythm patterns and chord settings that Joni Mitchell uses on a regular basis.

Keyboardist Christensen—who also covers some light percussion, clarinet and flute in the show—does an **admirable job** with Joni's eccentric piano-based tunes like *Woodstock* and *Down To You*. There are also two striking vocal-only selections—*Shadows and Light* and *Fiddle and Drum*—that reveal the austere power of Joni's unadorned songwriting.

What is most striking about the show, however, is just **how beautifully the voices of the three actors blend** while interpreting Joni Mitchell's timeless tunes. Duffy does an earthy take on her selections, while Sampson gets closest to the songwriter's own pure—but slightly detached—vocal sound. Uhre's sinuous high tenor, however, is the male equivalent to the prairie musician's soaring lyricism when it comes to singing.

Delivered in trios, duos and solos—with the occasional doo-wop style backing vocal—Joni's songs get a **respectful, honest reading** that



Photo: Len Shepard

resists the urge to inject any kind of show-biz excess into what is truly a unique and enduring body of work.

Thistle Theatre Design's imitation old-world stonework stage adds some needed gravitas to the show. And their lighting design makes **good use of the theatrical space** without adding too much overpowering dramatic effect.

While the theatrical aspects of the show—from Morpurgo's direction to the **confident performances** of the singer/actors to the **smart set, costume and lighting design**—are all **impressive**, the real attraction is the music itself.

With songs like *Big Yellow Taxi*, *Chelsea Morning*, *A Case of You*, *Blue*, *Free Man In Paris*, *You Turn Me On I'm A Radio*, *Carey* and almost twenty others, *Joni Mitchell: River* is a **delightful and satisfying** show by any measure.

The straightforward presentation and lack of drama makes the production seem **refreshingly original and invigorating**. And with the great singer/songwriter virtually retired from active recording and concertizing, there's no better way to **experience the genius of Joni Mitchell** in a live music setting.

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