

Arts&Leisure

On the Stage

MARY JORDAN

KNIGHTS OF MUSIC, running in The Lyric Theatre at Gold Reef City until November 8 is, above all, a state of mind, an attitude, a swagger. A premium has been placed on beauty, Britishness and intelligence as Richard Loring sets out to capture the vivid theatrical life in the music and musical productions of six knights of the realm: Cliff Richard, Paul McCartney, Elton John, Andrew Lloyd Webber, Tim Rice, and Cameron Mackintosh. Brian May sneaks in by virtue of being the monarch of stadium rock.

It is a show more deliberately practised and crafted than it would have you believe, for its grand success lies in creating a feeling of raw spontaneity. Of course it is going to be slick, clever, moving, shrewdly observed and dramatically satisfying. After all these years in show business and at the Sound Stage, Loring knows what he is about.

His gift lies in finding singers, youngsters packed with ability and promise, who will respond eagerly to direction, convey the breadth and magic of showtime hits, and replicate those flirtatious, hip-thrusting, funny bopping moments in a display of carefree and delicately lustful joy.

Best of all, Loring acknowledges that simply the best person with whom to travel on an emotional roller-coaster ride is musician Bryan Schimmel, the composer-pianist-conductor who breathes air into orchestral textures, who uses such a

variety of harmony, rhythm and colour that his arrangements bring fire to the score. Somehow, here, he manages to unearth details that one hasn't heard and couldn't imagine from familiar melodies, and highlights with humour and panache the wiles of seduction and romance. He is fearless, whether he is conveying subdued lyricism or demanding pyrotechnic performance. With unnerving concentration, musical director Rowan Bakker holds Schimmel's great structures and quirky settings in place.

Pop music is a powerful tool for triggering memories, allowing us to glimpse ourselves at earlier stages in our lives. Carly Graeme, Shaun V, Tracey-Lee Oliver, Thokozani Nzima, Ruth Brown and Kyle Matthews provide a perfection of form, theme and emotional resonance. You cannot help but be caught up in their vocal heft, in the words and in the music.

TAMMY BALLANTYNE

MZANSI Productions' latest offering of **CARMEN**, the ballet, tantalises, teases and throbs with energy and the "bling" factor. Staged in association with Vodacom and being presented at the Vodadome in Midrand, Dirk Badenhorst, artistic director of Mzansi and Timothy Le Roux, choreographer for this production, have clearly had the budget to pull out the stops. Andrew Botha, designer extraordinaire, fills the space with pulsating red and sensual black — roses, capes, fishnets and hot pants — all set against Jozi's skyline.

This is a Carmen that has been transposed from the tobacco factory to downtown Jozi and the build-up to 2010, a concept that is bold and exciting but doesn't always work on all levels. Le Roux's "eclectic"

choreography is still heavily balletic, accented with Spanish/flamenco and the matador meets pantsula/soccer soft-shoe sections just feel like they've been tagged on as an afterthought.

Lorna Maseko makes an impressive comeback to the stage after a two-year break doing TV work. She's a fiery, sassy temptress who in turn seduces, rejects and spits out Don José, danced by a breathtaking Craig Arnolds.

Raimond Martinov, guest artist, is a brooding Escamillo, with terrific technique. Kitty Phetla once again inhabits a solo role, this time as Death. Yarisha Singh is the highlight of Act 2.

The production is strong on visual impact and good ensemble work by the cast, but the overall feel is corporate and commercial, big on appearance but lacking in depth. It will certainly appeal to a youthful, diverse audience. It ends this Sunday.

