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Theater review: *No Love Songs* is a captivating, heartbreaking modern romance musical

By CHRISTOPHER ARNOTT | carnott@courant.com

No Love Songs is a refreshingly raw and honest, beautifully balanced two-person musical (plus a one-man onstage band) that's about something more than love.

Its two protagonists, fast-rising rock star Jessie and level-headed college student Lana, each have deep, rich and very different stories to tell about how they meet and how they try to stay truly together.

Kyle Falconer, lead singer and main songwriter for the Scottish band The View, and his real-life partner Laura Wilde, who co-wrote the musical's book with playwright Johnny McKnight, based *No Love Songs* on Falconer's solo album *No Love Songs for Laura*, but the musical makes sure that both Jessie's and Lana's perspectives are fully represented.

The musical, which is having its U.S. premiere through Oct. 20 at Goodspeed Musicals' Norma Terris Theatre in Chester, is the story of a love affair. The original *No Love Songs for Laura* album is a sweet, overproduced collection of pop songs with quirky sentiments like "I could be your stressball, a punching bag for your fear" and "I hope that we don't turn into monsters" and "If you wait around, I'll take the weight of the world for you." *No Love Songs* the musical adds a whole lot more.



Anna Russell-Martin in an earlier production of *No Love Songs*, which is having its U.S. premiere through Oct. 20 at Goodspeed Musicals' Norma Terris Theatre in Chester. (Tommy Ga-Ken Wan)

In a real-life dive-bar context, Falconer's songs sound rougher, truer, less sappy and more sarcastic. They capture the ideals that Lana and Jessie set for their life together, unaware of how apart they'll soon feel. The opening spoken line of the show is "We all have a soundtrack to our lives."

There are no argument songs in *No Love Songs*. There are break-up songs, make-up songs, pre-argument songs and figuring-each-other-out songs, but any harsh words are saved for the spoken dialogue, which is spat out in the actors' real-voice Scottish dialect.

The angry moments aren't physical or overbearing, just anguished or inarticulate expressions of misunderstanding and despair. This isn't the sort of Terris Theatre workshop that involved rewrites or new songs. The show was pretty much set when it arrived, having had successful runs in Scotland and London. The time at the Terris Theatre — Goodspeed's main venue for trying out new works in front of live audiences — was mainly spent figuring out how to adapt this Scottish show for American audiences.

In a postshow talkback on Thursday night, Russell-Martin said the performers had slowed down the pace of their talking and singing. Since the piece involves a lot of statements delivered directly to

the audience, they're able to provide immediate translations when necessary. When "nappies" or "CV" are mentioned, the actors can helpfully add "diapers" or "resume" without interrupting the flow of the dialogue. Some of the Scottishisms need no explanation and are simply adorable, like constantly referring to their baby son as "the wee man."

Mostly No Love Songs feels like a real love story with passion and hopes and dreams and mistakes and regrets and restarts. It's very much about the struggle of young parents, the anguish of being apart from loved ones and the difficulty of coping with day-to-day obligations. It's tough material, but No Love Songs succeeds in offering a hope and happiness, especially at the end of the show when it is very welcome.

The set is simple: The stage is strewn with large equipment boxes symbolic of a constantly touring rock band. The show's music director Gavin Whitworth fits right in with his keyboards and pedal-operated drum pad. McLarnon picks up an acoustic guitar for several songs, playing along with Whitworth.

The preshow music is a playlist of random British pop hits of the last 60 years, from The Beatles to Queen to Oasis to The Cranberries. The show's own score is much less choppy and much more specific and focused. They aren't quite rock songs, but they're loud and soulful and punchy.

Anna Russell Martin as Lana and John McLarnon as Jessie act the heck out of this short but emotionally exhausting show, which McLarnon has been involved with since before there was a full script and Martin joined before the London run earlier this year. They

each get some strong solo moments, staged by co-directors Andrew Panton and Tashi Gore enhanced by the intense lighting design of Grant Anderson, and their voices blend beautifully in the duets that cleverly turn some of the main songs into medleys.

It's fascinating, in the same week that the Broadway spectacular *A Beautiful Noise: The Neil Diamond Musical* with its own overinflated view of love and fame is at The Bushnell in Hartford, to see such a finely crafted intimate portrayal of some of the same struggles. *No Love Songs* deserves to be embraced by the small American theaters that have taken on *Once*, *Next to Normal*, *Midsummer* and other tidily built yet wonderfully emotionally messy relationship shows, whether or not they opt for the Scottish accents.

For now, this is exactly the kind of modern musical the Goodspeed should be putting its support behind. It's real, it's catchy and it lays down a challenge to all those cheesy love musicals where the romance always goes right.

No Love Songs runs through Oct. 20 at Goodspeed Musicals' Terris Theatre, 33 N. Main St., Chester.

Performances are Wednesdays and Thursdays at 2 and 7:30 p.m., Fridays at 8 p.m., Saturdays at 3 and 8 p.m. and Sundays at 2 p.m. \$25-\$59.

<https://www.goodspeed.org/shows/no-love-songs>