

The Province

Menard show has the potential to be great

BY CHRISTOPHER TESSMER, FOR THE LEADER-POST MAY 5, 2014

With a near-capacity crowd at the Conexus Arts Centre, the Regina Symphony Orchestra finished the Pops Series portion of its 2013-14 season with a world première Saturday night.

Accompanying former Saskatchewan resident and multi-talented entertainer Andrea Menard for the debut of her I Am Andrea Menard show on the mainstage, the symphony was led by internationally known conductor Charles Cozens, who also arranged much of the music for the evening's show.

Menard took the stage moments after the theatre darkened under the guise of a janitor cleaning up the stage. Tidying up after a performance, Menard's character starts singing into her mop imagining being able to perform onstage herself. After a few meek efforts, she finds the stage microphone still on and starts belting out the show opener, the show's eponymous single.

Performing standards I've Got the World on a String and Sing, Sing, Sing, Menard alternated with originals and traditional Métis and Aboriginal songs. Her rendition of 4 Directions Song after a customary smudging ceremony onstage was inspiring, which she followed up with a jig during an instrumental of The Red River Jig.

Featured during the jig was concertmaster Karen Constant who wowed the audience with her nimble and electrifying bow skills on the violin. Constant could definitely handle her own with the Charlie Daniels crowd.

After intermission, Menard, Cozens, the RSO and Menard's musical collaborator Robert Walsh returned for a second set of eight songs. Menard worked the crowd throughout the show sharing tidbits about her history and personal life, and even pulling three male audience members to the stage during the song I Fell For the Wrong Man Again.

Vocally, Menard was flawless, with an ability to hit her notes perfectly and with nary a hint of strain. It's obvious as she graces the stage that she's got the vocal chops, and her dancing demonstrates technique that can only be learned by countless hours of proper

training. Where the show stalled somewhat was between songs as the banter came across as somewhat kitschy at times.

Menard is clearly a sweet person and her whimsical banter was more-than-likely sincere as she comes across as completely genuine; early in the show she joked with Cozens and asked if she could "touch the orchestra." While it was cute at first as she ran around the stage poking individual symphony members as they played, it definitely got old by the end of the song.

Cozens, who besides arranging much of the songs performed played piano and accordion a few times, was used for banter with Menard that came off somewhat like a cheesy Vegas show. Although many of the mature members of the audience chuckled during the interactions, it felt forced and truthfully, it did little to add to the show. The multi-talented entertainer was truly at her best when she was 100 per cent herself. Talking about her Métis heritage, her Saskatchewan farm boy partner, and her belief that music brings people together and heals differences - her truth - combined with the fantastic music performances made parts of Saturday night feel like a high quality Vegas show. Alternately, the kitschy parts felt like bad vaudeville. Fortunately the majority of the show was more of the former than the latter.

As a whole, I Am Andrea Menard was a good but not great show. Much like an old Toyota Corolla, the show's frame was reliably sturdy and better built than most but not as fun or sexy as a sports car. Luckily, with a hometown crowd giving her plenty of love and a soft launch for the show's première, Menard's "total package" abilities can be tailored to build on the show's strengths as she takes it around the country because with a bit of polish the elements are all there.

I Am Andrea Menard Regina Symphony Orchestra May 3 Conexus Arts Centre