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'Respect' hits high notes at the Gem

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Detroit's historic Gem Theatre has managed once again to redefine the concept of a girls' night out. It's newest show, *Respect: A Musical Journey*, invites audiences on an inspiring ride toward female empowerment.

The story, which swings from joyously funny to rather touching and right back, is based on Dorothy Marcic's book, *Respect: Women in Popular Music*. Translated on stage by three-time Tony-award winner and director Hinton Battle, the show centers on one witty narrator, played by Kelly Shook, and a delightful ensemble cast including Shonka Dukureh, Sarah Madej and Marlyn Sanchez.

The musical opens with images of iconic women flashing onscreen. From Marilyn Monroe to Gloria Steinem, these scenes set the stage for a journey told through popular songs from 1900 to today.

At the onset the cast is carefully costumed in black dresses and lighting is cast sparingly upon them — making it easy for the audience members to not only relate to their words, but see themselves in those same familiar situations — be it love-lorn, subservient, stereotyped or, eventually, empowered.

It's almost impossible to resist singing along to the more than 64 songs carefully chosen and performed during this two-hour show. Sometimes the cast simply hints at an idea, singing *Can't Help Lovin' That Man*, or *If I Knew You Were Comin' I'd A Baked a Cake*. And sometimes they come together in grand form for songs like *I Enjoy Being a Girl*.

Imagery blends into this flash-back tale. As the narrator, Shook traces women's roles back in time. Once the story reaches a post-World War II era, the ensemble cast trades in their blue work shirts for frilly aprons. As womens' strength is re-focused as sheer sexuality, Sanchez sings, atop a piano no less, *Whatever Lola Wants*. By the '60s, women find a new sense of independence and kick on white go-go boots to prove it.

From *Stand By Your Man* to standing idly by the phone, audiences will find it easy to relate to *Respect*, and its entertaining view of the journey all women share.

By Act II the message has changed starkly in songs like *You Don't Own Me* and the moving four-part harmonies of *I Am Woman*.

Dukureh absolutely shines on *I Will Survive* as the stagelights practically transform the theater into Studio 54, circa 1978.

The scene shifted to Sanchez's touching tribute *At Seventeen*, and the show strikes an emotional chord.

But the roller-coaster pacing of *Respect* brings the crowd back up with Janis Joplin's rollicking *Piece of My Heart* and a medley featuring *The Greatest Love of All* by Whitney Houston and *Hero* by Mariah Carey.

A soaring message of strength and confidence shines through by the final moments, leaving the audience with a lasting smile and a connection to these characters — women of their past and potential role models for the future.
