

Senior's thesis promotes debate through music

BY JOHN COGGIN
STAFF WRITER

In the new musical "Soul Notes," University undergraduate Creighton Irons offers a philosophical debate over the meaning of race in America as argued through the diverse sounds of the country's history in music.

The musical is Irons' senior thesis, and for someone who admittedly is unfamiliar with the kind of product students in the dramatic art department are churning out each year, this thing was mind-blowing.

For the first half of the performance, I could not force the goofy grin off my face. The moment the six-piece live band began to storm through narrator Rasta's theme music, my head started bouncing and never stopped — even if the music did.

A white-people-sing-the-blues-too duet between Kelen Coleman and Jeff Fowler brought the house down, and the response from Trey Campbell was equally impressive.

Nonetheless, there are a couple of itchy-bitsy, teeny-weeny complaints:

While no one in the audience Saturday night could reasonably deem race an irrelevant topic, many might have found it difficult to embrace some of the perspectives from which Irons chose to examine the subject, for they often seemed so outdated or just plain cliché.

But I'll give him the clichéd characters and outdated arguments and justify it by saying that perhaps by using familiar semantics in the race debate, Irons allowed the audience to simply sit back and enjoy the inventive way in which he approached an old discussion — through music.

Because this is where he got it right.

For example, the contrived themes explored through an interracial relationship sort of left a bad taste in your mouth.

But the way in which Irons and director Dana Dobrevá chose to depict the couple was absolutely brilliant.

Eliza is the hopeless romantic to Lyndon's uncertain realist, as acted out by Megan Kauffmann

THEATERREVIEW

**SOUL NOTES
STUDIO 2
SATURDAY, MARCH 5**

★★★

and Atrayus Goode, respectively. Their palpable chemistry together made their duets the highlight of the show.

Kauffmann's earnest Broadway style served as the perfect antithesis to Goode's velvety R&B croon.

That the two styles fit so well on top of each other is irrefutable evidence of the skill of the singers and is a tribute to the success of the writer and director in depicting unexpected harmony between two people through music.

But we could have done without a couple of those scenes in which character after character speccified his or her perspective on race.

And the use of Andy, the central character who Irons sends on a research expedition to discover whether race does indeed "exist," was a forced and unnecessary device to move along the plot. The character was a distraction and made the performance seem more like an after-school special than an intellectual debate.

(But props to David Greenslade for managing to sustain that look of yearning naïveté for three hours straight.)

The performances by the singers seemed to only get better as the night progressed because Irons gave them such quality material to work with.

So, to Irons, I repeat — let your music speak. This is where you got it right.

Contact the A&E Editor at artsdesk@unc.edu.

STARSYSTEM

- ★ POOR
- ★★ FAIR
- ★★★ GOOD
- ★★★★ EXCELLENT
- ★★★★★ CLASSIC

Sequel lacks plot, chemistry

BY WILLIAM FONVIELLE
STAFF WRITER

"Be Cool" is the lowest form of a bad movie.

The opening segments are jolly and quick, indicating a pleasurable time at the talkies. Your hopes begin to rise, but then — bam! — the 10-minute mark hits.

It's all downhill from there, as the film switches to autopilot and descends into a pit of tepid gags and strained plotlines.

By the end, you're not only bored, you're angry at the film for seducing you, for drawing you into its lair and then disappearing after sticking you with the bill.

Director F. Gary Gray, along with screenwriter Peter Steinfeld, effectively took the original "Get Shorty" and neutered it, being content with replacing pointed satire on the entertainment world with a white man who speaks as a black stereotype. That leads to such inspired lines as, "Stop hatin', start participatin'!"

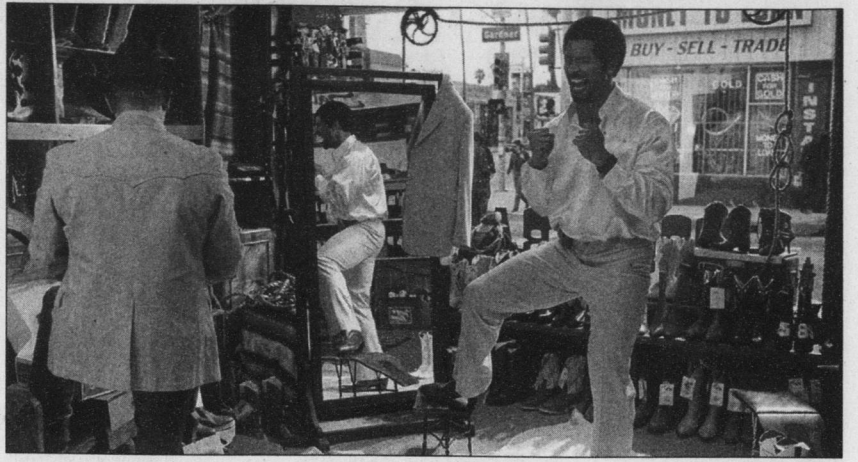
The tangled mess of a plot involves John Travolta's character, Chili Palmer, a slick movie producer trying to jump into the music biz and ensure that all the good guys end up in a happy place.

In the first film, there seemed to be a real sense of danger and purpose, which only made the consistent humor more effective.

Here, once the inept Russian mafia enters, you might consider checking your cell phone for messages — or just eye it until a message appears. Or maybe engage in a quick game of "Snake."

If you can move past 500 points, it gets pretty wild.

Part of the fun of "Be Cool" was apparently supposed to stem from



COURTESY OF MGM

Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson gets inexplicably excited about his new shoes and cool kicks in "Be Cool," the sequel to the 1995 hit "Get Shorty." In the film, Johnson plays the role of menacing bodyguard Elliot Wilhelm.

nostalgia, seeing "Pulp Fiction" buddies Travolta and Uma Thurman reunite.

But nothing exists between their characters, except for wasted potential. They meet under the pretense of being old friends, but audiences are supplied with no backstory and are expected to buy their relationship, despite its lack of chemistry.

Even the seemingly guaranteed crowd-pleaser of seeing Travolta dance is shattered by Gray's need to keep the camera moving and cutting around him, never allowing a decent perception of his movements.

Gray and Steinfeld exhibit an overreliance on casual name-dropping to create a sense of real-time Hollywood, while conveniently

forgetting to support this conceit with legitimate wit or satire.

These referential scenes of both "Get Shorty" and the greater Hollywood community never exist beyond level one to become legitimately funny in and of themselves.

If there's one saving grace to "Be Cool," it's that the cast seems to be having a ball. They are all capable of keeping a straight face while being handed ridiculous situations.

Travolta in particular appears to be having more fun on screen than he's had in years, and The Rock exudes a natural comedic charisma.

Hell, even Vince Vaughn delivers, despite the fact that his annoying, one-note, wannabe gangster

MOVIEREVIEW

"BE COOL"

★★★

character is like one of those blow-up dolls. No matter how many times you punch it, it mockingly pops back up.

Overall, the film is a failed retreat of its predecessor, exhibiting none of its slickness. It's a shame, too, because the first 10 minutes presented alone would make a wonderful short film, albeit one without plot, character or ending.

"Be Cool" gives unwarranted, unnecessary sequels a bad name.

Contact the A&E Editor at artsdesk@unc.edu.

Crooning rocker succeeds with new 'Dreams'

BY HARRY KAPLOWITZ
STAFF WRITER

Jack Johnson has more or less created a distinct sound for himself, the kind heard on college radio stations on lazy Saturday afternoons.

His previous albums achieved a kind of symbiosis in sound, each balancing frail, subtle melodies with cool, laid back lyrics. His most recent effort, *In Between Dreams*, is more of the same and a little something extra, all at the same time.

Critics contend that all of Johnson's songs sound the same — and they do. However, Johnson matures, if not evolves, with each successive album. *In Between Dreams* gives listeners the same formulaic approach that 2001's *Brushfire Fairytales* and 2003's *On and On* gave them, and it's something they can't tire of.

Blending equal parts melody and charm and throwing in a distinct worldly sound for good measure, *In Between Dreams* becomes a loosely-woven tapestry of three-minute sound bites that leaves his

fans coolly swaying to a lightly twanged ukulele.

The goal for any musician is to grow from album to album and come to embody an unexpectedly enjoyable sound — it's the stuff Grammy dreams are made of. Johnson does this with his new album, but you couldn't tell it from the first few tracks.

The album's opening trifecta of "Better Together," "Never Know" and "Banana Pancakes" sounds like everything else Johnson has ever dished out: musically-simple jam sessions that leave you idly bobbing your head.

That mood changes entirely with "No Other Way," a slow, lullaby-type serenade that starts to paint of portrait of the kind of mood Johnson is developing. One of the album's best tracks, "No Other Way" is the kind of honest pop song Johnson could never produce with his first two albums.

"Sitting, Waiting, Wishing," the album's radio-ready single, is more of the same Johnson fare, but even

MUSICREVIEW

**JACK JOHNSON
IN BETWEEN DREAMS**

★★★★★

his "same old, same old" has something new to offer, a kind of musical ebb and flow that never before personalized his tunes.

"Situations" and "Belle," both shorter than two minutes, are the kind of hit-and-run songs that quickly strike a chord with listeners and leave just as fast. "Belle," especially, becomes an easy album favorite with Johnson harmonizing à la français to the tune of an accordion.

It is the album's final five songs, though, that give it its winning personality. In order, "If I Could," "Breakdown," "Belle," "Do You Remember" and "Constellations" all work together to create an artistically accomplished ending for *In Between Dreams*.

"Breakdown," perhaps the album's standout track, is the

kind of song that allows Johnson to hearken his inner poet. In it, Johnson emotes lyrics tinged with heartache and soft chords that completely contradict his words.

It's this kind of contradiction that makes Johnson such a stellar composer, giving him the ability to say one thing and evoke feelings of another; the result is brilliant songwriting and even better execution.

The album's final two tracks, "Do You Remember" and "Constellations" are completely mesmerizing in their delivery, with lyrics both simple and subtle but a meaning that reaches far beyond its conveyance.

In Between Dreams is a perfect phrase to describe this different face for Johnson: not a new face, just a different one. He's an artist in transition, on the brink of something big. It's albums like this, though, that makes us wish him to stay in an artistic limbo.

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