

A trip back in time with 'Jimmy Durante and Friends'

By: JAY LUSTIG | NJArts.net | February 14, 2015 |

Fans of New Jersey jazz know that Grover Kemble, a mainstay of the state's jazz scene for decades, can sing well. But now we also know that he can sing well out of the corner of his mouth, in a sandpaper rasp. Kemble has put together a Jimmy Durante tribute show, "Jimmy Durante and Friends," that is being presented at the Parsippany Playhouse this weekend, and he is planning to continue presenting it at other locations in the future.

Durante may seem like an odd candidate for such a show. Even 50 years ago, he seemed like a relic from a long-gone era in show business. But Kemble makes a good case that Durante, who died in 1980 at the age of 86, should be celebrated, singing his catalog — novelty songs, as well as classic American ballads — with great warmth and energy, and resurrecting his corny but still-good-for-a-laugh jokes and odd catchphrases (he ends the show by saying, as Durante always did, "Goodnight, Mrs. Calabash, wherever you are").



Grover Kemble as Jimmy Durante.

Kemble's Durante deliberately mangles his words, just as the original did. He tells us he stays away from health food because "At my age, I need all the preservatives I can get," and says he doesn't have a mustache because it won't grow in the shade. (Durante made lots of jokes about his big nose, which he liked to call his schnozzola; Kemble can't match him, physically, in this department, but the jokes still work).

The show is basically Durante's nightclub act. Kemble is supported in his task by a handful of props, and two actor-musicians — Regan Ryzuk on piano and Tim Metz on bass — who play Durante's accompanists, and the straightmen for many of his jokes. You get the sense that these characters have done this act a million times before — just as Durante and his own backing musicians must have done — and yet they still get a kick out of it.

Anyone nostalgic for the Age of Vaudeville will enjoy this show, and anyone who wonders why people are still nostalgic for it will understand why. There's a wide-eyed ebullience to Kemble's performance — almost an innocence, despite the occasional double entendres in the jokes — that should make it enjoyable for viewers of all age.