

Cabaret queens

Women in Voice
QPAC Playhouse
March 11

Reviewed by Mark Bretherton

THE bar was raised to lofty heights long ago, and the 2005 season of Women in Voice kept the standard at an almost dauntingly high level. These are all singers of the highest calibre, and you never know when they are going to make you laugh or send you spiralling into heartbreak mode.

The concept is straightforward.

Six singers, supported by a versatile backing band, each have about 20 minutes to sing whatever captures their imagination.

Mistress of ceremonies Leah Cotterell started the show rolling smoothly, singing a couple of songs and providing an introduction for the sultry Barbara Fordham.

Fordham laid a solid foundation to build on, her dark, cascading hair a perfect complement to the stage's heavy velvet curtains and dark, understated atmosphere.

With an art theme linking her material together, songs included *Michaelangelo* by Emmylou Harris and *Truth of a Woman* by Kristina Olsen.

Kate Miller-Heidke, a highlight last year, gave another excellent performance. She effortlessly crossed the gap between pop, opera and the cutting ocker comedy of her self-penned *Australian Idol*.

Let's face it – even if the talents of half a dozen Shannon Nolls were combined into one uber-Idol, Miller-Heidke could comfortably sing him off the stage.

Her devastatingly beautiful rendition of the Nick Cave murder ballad *Little Water Song* was one of the night's most sublime performances.

Her second and fourth songs had a light-comedic content and, while entertaining, it would have been



LINING UP . . . Jenny Morris delivered some familiar pop hits with gusto.

great if she had stretched her wings just that little bit further.

Seasoned performer Queenie van de Zandt effortlessly milked the crowd for laughs in a musical theatre routine.

The guy behind me was so out of breath he was snorting helplessly trying to keep up as she dropped into one character after another, delivering songs that were alternately funny and touching.

Her fake eastern European accent began to grate on me but others I talked to said she was their favourite of their evening.

After the interval, Jenny Morris took the stage and seemed very keen to make it clear she was just "one of the gals", riffing about the realities of motherhood.

Monday Monday by the Mamas

and the Papas gave her a rolling start, and although it took her a while to sink properly into the light country strains of *Either or Both of Me*, some sweetly melancholic lap steel guitar provided a great focus in the meantime.

Familiarity also has its place, and Morris delivered several of her old upbeat pop hits with appropriate gusto to round out her set.

In contrast, Zulya Kamalova's voice spoke to me of exotic places and made me wish I was on a train heading for St Petersburg.

The Russian-Australian songstress took the crowd on a journey across the world and back through time. One moment you were sitting in a Parisian cabaret from the first half of the 20th century, the next you were in a gypsy field, listening

as the night air seemed to weep with grief and unfulfilled desire.

Kamalova's set was my favourite, although some of the group I was with had different opinions.

That's the beauty of Women in Voice – one person's cast-offs are another's star-spun ambrosia.

The Beatles were the focus for Alison St Ledger this year. Interestingly enough, this seemed to shift a lot of the focus to the backing band, as Beatles numbers are typically ensemble pieces.

As they went from the tingling clarity of Jamie Clark's guitar solo in *Something* to the swirling instrumental chaos of *A Day in the Life*, the band's incredible diversity was on display. The standout for me was *Tomorrow Never Knows*, complete with eastern drone and psychedelic lighting effects.