

Essentials rock around the tree, electrify with AC/DC doo-wop

HARRY CURRIE

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"Joy to the world, the Lord is come" sang the choir-gowned a cappella quartet The Essentials when they opened their new show, An Essential Christmas, at the Waterloo Stage Theatre on Wednesday.

That didn't last but a few moments, however, for the gowns came off, the music switched into the Three Dog Night version of Joy to the World, and The Essentials began to demonstrate why they are the leading a cappella doo-wop-style group in Canada and among the top groups of its kind in the world.

If you've seen The Essentials before you know what a good show they put on, but you haven't seen anything like the current show. For example, The Essentials doing AC/DC, Avril Lavigne, Steppenwolf, Pink Floyd and Britney Spears? You gotta hear it to believe it!

But this is also a real Christmas show, and the four singers do a lot of seasonal standards, but all with an Essential twist and sound: Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree, Rudolph, Silver Bells, Jingle Bell Rock, Frosty the Snowman and Santa Claus is Coming to Town.

They also through in two new songs from their yet-to-be-released CD, Some Things Never Change and Floating. The first has a C&W flavour, and the second, Floating, is a beautiful ballad featuring Dan Speck's clear falsetto. Both tunes have an instrumental track, a very different thing for these four lads, and it may well be part of a plan to break into the mainstream of popular music with a CD that will get air play on commercial radio.

Rounding out their program, The Essentials gave us several songs which had been in their repertoire at one time but which had been retired, a couple of reworkings of their standards -- The Lion Sleeps Tonight was spectacular here -- and several songs that they must sing at every concert for their very large and very vocal fan base.



FILE PHOTO

The Essentials are back at the Waterloo Stage Theatre for three shows next week.

The Essentials are much more than singers. Watch them move on stage, catch the interplay between them as they perform, listen to the soaring vocal harmonies, and you feel the joy they get from their passion for entertaining.

It's always amazing to hear them when they soften down, as they do in several of the intros to their arrangements. The accuracy of pitch, the rich quality of the blend and the steadiness of tone mimic the vox humana stop on a pipe organ, so perfect is the sound.

Occasionally they take this a step further, leaving the microphones on stage and walking into the audience, there to deliver "unplugged" as they sing one of the tunes they learned when they first started in London over 10 years ago. On Wednesday they did this with Just My Imagination, and you could have heard a pin drop.

The leads are shared by the three upper voices: Bob Van Gieson with a true '60s pop lead voice, Dan Speck with a light Broadway sound and an incredible falsetto, and Jooh Nah with an expressive powerhouse for the big numbers. Bottom voice Joe Oliva pumps out a bass line that never seems to pause for a breath -- accurate, strong, and what low notes!

All of The Essentials' shows are fun, but An Essential Christmas supersedes any show they have ever done for comedy and hilarity.

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STAGE

What: An Essential Christmas

What: The Essentials

Where: Waterloo Stage Theatre

Day: Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday

Time: 7:30 p.m.

Cost: \$28; \$25 subscribers

Phone: 888-0000