

Tony DeSare impressive in Shuler Theater debut

By Tim Keller – For the Comet | Posted: Friday, November 28, 2014 4:00 am

RATON – Maybe it's from living so far from America's entertainment centers, but it's impossible not to be impressed by how many unfamiliar entertainers parade through Raton's Shuler Theater in the annual Performing Arts Series and provoke the thought, "Why is this act not world famous?" They're that good.

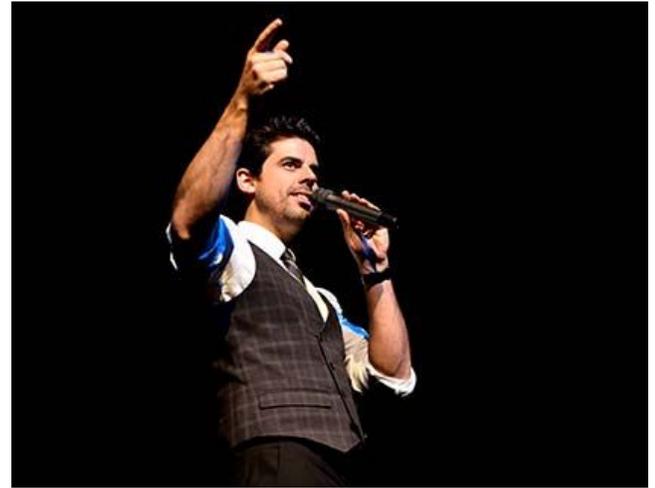
It turns out that the sponsor, Raton Arts & Humanities Council (RAHC), books its acts exclusively through Minnesota's Allied Concert Services—one of whose field agents is Raton's Bill Fegan—and Allied deserves the credit for finding, vetting, and sending on tour only acts sure to please. The latest example arrived last Wednesday night (Nov. 19) when young New York City jazz crooner and pianist Tony DeSare made enthusiastic fans of an impressively large midweek Shuler audience.

Traveling with a drummer and bassist, it was DeSare's first time in New Mexico and one of 25 shows within a 30-day stretch. A good singer and fabulous pianist, his most winning talents Wednesday night may have been his good looks, affable personality and sense of humor.

Although RAHC didn't promote the fact, DeSare's show had a theme and a title—"My Generation: The Contemporary American Songbook." His 100-minute show presented 17 songs ranging from Irving Berlin's 100-year-old "I Love a Piano"—the Yamaha endorsee played it on the Shuler's big Steinway grand—to newer classics by Bruce Springsteen and Prince, plus a pair of DeSare's originals that held up just fine in that challenging company.

By stripping down soul and rock classics to a piano trio format, or often just solo piano and voice, DeSare transformed the songs into something different, bringing out new interpretations and strengths. One could be forgiven for not recognizing the show's opener, which turned out to be "Takin' It to the Streets" by the Doobie Brothers. He followed that with "Kiss" by Prince—and both sounded more like Bobby Darin than the Doobies or Prince.

Warmed up, DeSare next played a two-year-old original dance called "New Orleans Tango," where bassist Steve Doyle and drummer Mike Klopp started earning their keep. Doyle, in particular, was an impressive player who shared an enjoyable chemistry with DeSare.



New York City entertainer Tony DeSare wows the Shuler Theater crowd.

Irving Berlin's song was followed by a pair of Ray Charles classics, the first of which—Eddie Arnold's "You Don't Know Me"—revealed the night's only limitations in DeSare's voice. The soulful song has been recorded by a procession of singers with deep mournful voices that DeSare simply lacked. He bounced right back, though, with "Hallelujah, I Love Her So."

From there DeSare covered Marvin Gaye and James Taylor along with two of his own greatest influences, Frank Sinatra and Elton John. The audience favorites, though, were some lesser-known tunes that were pure fun and made great use of the performer's winning sense of humor. He took the classical "Sabre Dance" that he learned for a Carnegie Hall performance and turned it into "Sabre Dance Boogie," demonstrating that he's rockin' good on piano.

His two-minute commercial theme for a Long Island luxury bus line to the Hamptons, "The Jitney Line," won almost as much applause and laughter as his uncanny musical impressions of Elton John and Neil Diamond.

DeSare often performs with symphony orchestras. One asked him to prepare a Christmas song. Unenthusiastic, he experimented until he came up with an impressive tour de force that he shared Wednesday night, a medley of 17 interpretations of "Jingle Bells," in this order: Piano Lesson, ragtime, Randy Newman, tango, Jewish, Michael McDonald, Spanish, Elton John, polka, Radiohead, Boogie Woogie, Neil Diamond, Bob Dylan, blues, rock & roll, and classical. As he finished to thunderous applause, he stood and said, "I think I got them all. Did anyone count them?" Yes. He did 16, so the Raton audience missed one.

He built to a close with Springsteen's "Fire" followed by Jerry Lee Lewis's "Great Balls of Fire" complete with treble parts played by right foot. When DeSare left the stage and returned for an encore, a woman called out, "Was that the intermission?" The audience wanted much more and said so. DeSare gave them a ten-minute rendition of Duke Ellington's "Take the A Train" complete with extended solos for piano, bass, and drums.

RAHC's Performing Arts Series now takes a mid-season break of almost three months before the next show, although it's bringing a special January 17 concert called "Yesterday: A Tribute to the Beatles." Then three shows remain from February through May, all booked from Allied Concert Services, all acts unfamiliar to Raton, and—if past experience is an indication—all acts sure to please.

Raton Arts & Humanities Council is based at Old Pass Gallery, 145 S. 1st St., (575) 445-2052.