

“. . . Eloquent. . . Irresistible. . . A Resounding Triumph!”

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Corky Siegel's blues come up rosy, just like Aurora center's outlook

By Howard Reich
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While the Chicago Theater struggles to survive, another former movie palace scored a resounding triumph over the weekend.

Certainly no one in the nearly sold-out Paramount Arts Centre in Aurora could have missed the irony of Saturday evening's season opener. Here, in tiny downtown Aurora, an exquisitely restored theater was enjoying a two-fold success: the prestigious, Midwest premiere of a large new work by blues artist Corky Siegel, and a huge, lively audience to welcome it.

What do the folks at the Paramount, which was kicking off its 11th season, know that their counterparts at the now-dark Chicago theatre don't? For one, they clearly have a knack for clever and adventurous programming.

Siegel's new "Chamber Blues" show, for instance, was a big hit when it bowed in Colorado earlier this year, and his longstanding reputation as a charismatic Chicago performer made the evening a natural for any local impresario shrewd enough to book it. Beyond that, the very nature of "Chamber Blues"—which, as its title suggests, fuses classical chamber music and blues traditions—seemed sure to draw a wide spectrum of listeners.

Little wonder, then, that the Paramount drew as many music lovers in tie-dye shirts and jeans as three-piece suits and glittering gowns.

As for the music, it turned out to be all it was promoted to be, and then some. Siegel who obviously relishes playing to a crowd,

has the personality, as well as the musical technique, to bring blues idioms into the legitimate concert hall. That he can do so with such ease and so little pretension argues strongly for the quality of his work.

Essentially, "Chamber Blues" is a cabaret-style review placed on a concert stage, where one can fully appreciate its musical subtleties. It offers a potpourri of famous Siegel songs [including "Linoleum," "Idaho Potato Man" and "Southwest Coast Blues"] string quartet interludes by Siegel [as performed by the Consortium String quartet] and various combinations of the two. In all the evening might well have been titled "Corky Siegel is Alive and Well and living in Rogers Park," for it is a kind of autobiographical excursion into the musical sensibilities of a North Side blues man.

For classical music listeners, the foremost question is whether the work offers new sounds or simply dresses up old ones in highbrow arrangements. The answer is mixed: Though there's nothing melodic, harmonic or rhythmic here that we haven't heard before, the way Siegel puts it all together is uniquely his own. If anyone doubted the musical depth of urban blues, this evening held it up to close inspection and proved it irresistible.

Blues fans might wonder what's the purpose of having four tuxedoed string players attempting to vamp on their refined instruments. But when the Consortium Quartet [eloquently led by violinist Arnold Roth] stepped up to their mikes and had at it, the results were no less persuasive than, say the jazz violin playing of Stephane Grappelli.