

# 'Waitress' the musical at RBTL: pop star Sara Bareilles songs lead from the heart



Ephie Aardema, Christine Dwyer and Melody A. Betts in 'Waitress.' (Photo: Daneil Lippitt)

Have a seat, Rochester, your *Waitress* will be with you shortly.

*Waitress* is based on the 2007 indie film of the same name starring Keri Russell, which was a tender, melancholic success in its own right.

The musical version pairs that story with Sara Bareilles's infectious piano-driven score. The combination is clearly popular: This spring, the show crossed the three-year mark of its Broadway run.

The touring production stops in Rochester from June 4 to 9 at the RBTL's Auditorium Theater.

Bareilles, with massive hits "Brave" and "Love Song" to her name plus a recently released sixth studio album, has a great deal of affection for her first musical.

"I said yes to doing this thing that I've never done before, nor had I ever expected that I would step into the role of composer of a musical. But it has been the wildest and most joyful ride of my life," she said by phone. "It's changed just absolutely everything about my artistic life and how I spend my time and the projects I'm working on. My life falls into two categories, and it's before *Waitress* and after *Waitress*."

The plot centers on Jenna, a gifted baker who waits tables by day and makes pies by night at a diner in a southern Indiana town. Jenna finds herself pregnant, and thus trapped, in a loveless marriage with a

husband who is a disappointment, to put it mildly. The story unfolds from there as Jenna attempts to regain control of her life and, well, does a lot of baking, which is a metaphor in multiple ways.

“One of the things that makes this show so unique and so relatable is that it’s just about real people — messy, flawed humans who are doing the best they can and making mistakes and trying to make them right,” Bareilles said. “And it’s about community and friendship and relationships, and where they fall short and where we have to rise above our own personal challenges to kind of find our own truths again.”

In addition to lots of flour, butter and sugar, Jenna is surrounded by a cast of characters that Bareilles describes as running the gamut from “the quirky eccentric sidekick to the crotchety old, but lovable, diner owner.”

Part of the appeal is how the story is told. “I think one of the [reasons] why it’s connecting so well — and something that people don’t know about the show — is that it’s really, really funny.”

Besides writing the music, Bareilles has in the past performed the Jenna role. (She is not performing in the Rochester run; the lead will be played by Christine Dwyer, who starred in the Broadway run of *Wicked*.) And being a musical with baking, the show involves its fair share of prop handling and choreography. Pies are slid along countertops and must be caught. Baking ingredients are tossed around. Mixing bowls and spoons need to be handled without fumbling.

“It’s a nightmare until it’s not,” Bareilles said. “When I was doing the show ... I was almost in tears. I was like, ‘I can’t do this.’ I can’t remember all of the business of the show... This is a prop master’s nightmare for we have endless shelves of stuff that has to find its way on stage over and over again. Stuff that has to get manipulated and changed. The amount of flour and sugar that we go through — it’s just insane.”

Of course, the music matters in musicals, and the music might matter even more here. Listening to Bareilles’ body of work, which includes seven Grammy nominations, the right ingredients are there. In a similar vein as Elton John or John Legend, her songs are ambitious and catchy, and they lead with the heart.

“I’m someone who really writes about emotional architecture of people,” she said. “I love talking about the human condition, so I just tried to apply that to this show and this story.”

The result is that some people can’t get enough of it. Bareilles said there are fans who’ve seen the show more than 60 times. The production team calls them “Frequent Pie-ers.”