

# Concert review Pink Martini takes audience on dazzling ride at Hanover in Worcester

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WORCESTER — Pink Martini has a way of creating an illusion on stage. The 10-person band, fronted by vocalist China Forbes and pianist Thomas M. Lauderdale and accompanied by two guest vocalists, transported the packed house Wednesday at The Hanover Theatre for the Performing Arts around the world and back through time with seeming ease, shifting between genres and languages with barely a hitch.

Forbes demonstrated her musical sleight-of-hand right out of the gate with a tender and vulnerable rendition of the song “Let’s Never Stop Falling in Love,” which feels like a ’20s torch song but was actually an original composition. If you didn’t know that, you could be forgiven for trying to seek out a Josephine Baker version, but nonetheless, the grandness of the theater became a smoky Roaring ’20s jazz lounge, the song felt so intimate.

Like any good illusionist, Forbes dropped her façade for a moment to greet the audience. A former resident of Cambridge, she revealed that her first major concert experience was at the Worcester Centrum. (She wasn’t 100 percent certain, but she thinks it was Peter Gabriel.) Lauderdale also spoke a bit about how the Oregon-based band was formed to entertain at political fundraisers and has grown into something else. Then, pleasantries out of the way, the band launched into another original song — this one in French — called “Sympathique,” which they described as an “ode to smoking.” It was a tightly restrained performance, bristling with feeling and leaving room for the delicacy of Lauderdale’s performance.

For anyone who saw the band’s 2015 performance at the Hanover, fronted by vocalist Storm Large, the show had a different feel. Large is, pun unintended, something of a force of nature on stage, commanding attention and focus. Forbes has a lighter touch. There’s more room for the instrumentalists to breathe in stylings, allowing — in the case of “Sympathique” — a solo turn such as Antonis Andreou’s mournful trombone to truly shimmer. It’s that quality that also creates the illusion of intimacy that makes a song such as “Ich Dich Liebe” — originally written for a ’60s German Western and sung by the great Mamie Van Doren.

The energy in the room took a more upbeat turn as vocalist and percussionist Timothy Nishimoto took center stage for a moment to lead a rousing rendition of the Spanish song “Donde Estás Yolanda?” It was an incredibly easy to get swept up into the song, carried by the invigorating percussion section, contrasted by Nicholas Crosa’s violin. That violin would soon again seize prominence on the original song in Croatian, “U plavu zoru.”

The ease with which Forbes bounces between languages is astounding, as to is the amount of emotional content which transcends language barriers, but when they played the Turkish song “Aşkım Bahardı,” the singer was quick to caution that tone doesn’t always translate to meaning: The song is upbeat, even raucous, but the lyrics are actually rather dark. Still, the whirlwind soundscape continued to be engaging as guest vocalists Edna Vázquez, doing a stunning version of “Perhaps, Perhaps, Perhaps,” and Jimmie Herrod, delivering an extremely soulful rendition of the classic “Exodus (This Land Is Mine),” changing the key lyric to say “This land is ours” to make it more inclusive. Although Vázquez was interrupted by a feedback issue, both proved themselves electrifying performers.

Forbes retook the spotlight with a series of songs that culminated in a boisterous rendition of Helen Reddy’s “I Am Woman,” which she dedicated to Dr. Blasey Ford and for which she invited every woman in the room to join her on stage to sing, which many did. She also invited people to dance on stage during a subsequent swing number, but only one couple, who had *clearly* had some good swing dance lessons, took her up on the offer.

After an intermission, the band returned in a Latin flare to “Bolero,” each instrument glistening and distinct amid the musical tapestry, before giving way to an international cascade of songs, including “Hang On Little Tomato,” which Lauderdale said was inspired by an advertisement and which he described as “a song of hope.” The song illustrated the theatric quality to Forbes’ voice, her expressive phrasing and articulation. Indeed, it felt less like an original number and more like some lost Lerner and Loewe tune. Other highlights included Herrod returning for a breathtaking rendition of the jazz standard “He Was Too Good for Me,” which brought the house down, as did a bracing and high-energy rendition of the Japanese song “Zundoko-bushi,” sung by Nishimoto.

For many, though, the highlight might well have been Forbes’ rendition of what’s arguably the band’s biggest pop hit, “Hey, Eugene,” a tale of drunkenly making out with someone at a party and then having the titular Eugene subsequently lose her number. In some ways, the clear, contemporary pop stylings could have felt like an intrusion but instead came off as just a foray into another language and genre, which had been the course of the night. The second set ended with an enormously fun rendition of the South African song “Pata pata,” which brought the audience to its feet for a standing ovation. In an encore, Forbes performed a spellbinding version of the romantic “Amado mio,” and the evening ended with the obligatory conga line to her rousing take on “Brazil.” It was a joyous end to an uplifting, energizing show, one that took the audience through time and space, leaving them dizzily happy and dancing as they returned to the streets of Worcester.

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