Calgary’s Lunchbox Theatre recently staged a production based on the creative output of one of Canada’s most celebrated singer/songwriters, Stan Rogers. The producer and principal performer of Rise Again very wisely chose not to take the route of a one-man show in which Rogers would be portrayed by a singer/actor; rather, the focus of the show is revealed in its subtitle, The Songs of Stan Rogers. The show consists of nine of Rogers’s compositions performed by Tim Williams (guitars, mandolin), Ron Casat (keyboards, bass, accordion) and Kathy Cook (mandolin, guitar, bass), and interspersed with commentary on Rogers’s life work and on the mythology that has grown up around him. All three musicians contribute vocals; Casat and Cook take lead vocals on one song each and provide harmony behind Williams on the remaining numbers. Williams also provides most of the commentary between songs. There was not enough of this material to suit me, and I had hoped to learn more about Rogers than I did. On the other hand, the subtitle to the piece makes it abundantly clear that the songs are the basis for the production.

The selection of material for the production is very interesting. Although many Canadians associate Rogers with the Maritimes because of his earlier work, he was in fact an Ontario native who wrote about people from all parts of the country. More than half of the songs in the show ("Northwest Passage," "The Field Behind the Plow," "Free in the Harbor," "The Idiot," "Lies") relate directly or indirectly to Western life in general and/or Alberta in particular. For an Albertan audience, this selection demonstrates the depth of Rogers’s songwriting skill in an especially appealing way. (The set design by Johanne Deleeuw emphasizes the contrasts between Rogers’s perceived Maritime background and the broader range of his songs, as it provides a backdrop of wharfs and fishing nets for the predominantly Western songs.)

The arrangements of the songs are both well-conceived and well-performed, at all times allowing the carefully crafted lyrics that are the hallmark of Rogers’s songs to take centre stage. (I particularly enjoyed Casat’s gentle accordion on "Free in the Harbour.") Tim Williams is a strong singer with a pleasant voice.
that adapts well to a variety of musical styles. Casat and Cook have voices that are less powerful, but well suited to harmony singing and to the songs on which they sing lead. Casat sings lead on "Try Like the Devil," a gospel-influenced country song quite different in style from the others in the show. His singing style was very different from that of Williams and Cook, but it suited the song well and made a pleasing performance. My only criticism of Cook’s work on "Lies" is with her diction; although she gave a very moving and dramatic performance of the song I had difficulty making out all the words in spite of my familiarity with the song.

Although the songs were interspersed with information about Rogers’s life and work, in essence the show is a musical performance. The set is nicely paced, saving the sure-fire crowd-pleasers ("Barrett’s Privateers," "The Mary Ellen Carter") to the end, so that the audience leaves on an upbeat note. The opening, an a capella rendition of "Northwest Passage," almost worked—the harmonies were good, but Casat and Cook were too far from the single microphone that the three shared for this first number. As well, the key chosen for the song was a bit low for Williams and Casat, and a bit high for Cook, so that all three were struggling with pitches by times.

I had some initial misgivings about my ability to listen objectively to Rogers’s songs performed by other artists. It is much to their credit that Williams, Casat and Cook made the songs their own, so that comparison with Rogers’s recorded performances rarely occurred to me. In all, this was a very good production, providing an introduction to Rogers’s music for those unfamiliar with the broad range of his material, and allowing those who have known Rogers’s songs for years an opportunity to appreciate his music objectively, without the misty nostalgia that takes over when well-loved recordings are played for the umpteenth time. These are great songs that should be sung and listened to for their inherent worth, and not because Rogers’s untimely death elevated him to near-mythic status.

There is talk of plans to reprise Rise Again at other venues, possibly other provinces. As these plans materialize, we’ll report them.

Lunchbox Theatre, Level 2, 205 −5th Avenue SW, Calgary, Fax (403) 264-5461, runs plays continuously during the September-May season, Monday-Saturday @12:10. Phone (403) 265-4292 (Box Office) for information on current offerings.