

‘A Boy and His Soul’: The rhythm, and blues, of his life

JOE DZIEMIANOWICZ

Friday, September 25th 2009, 4:00 AM

The sense of smell is the strongest memory trigger.

But the ears are nothing to sniff at.

Hearing tunes from vintage records rockets Colman Domingo back to the '70s and '80s, and he takes us with him in his vibrant memoir, "A Boy and His Soul."

Over the one-man play's 85 minutes, he celebrates a gawky gay kid from not-always-sunny Philadelphia who comes of age, comes out of the closet and comes to see things "with adult eyes."

The story is set in motion when Domingo returns to his childhood home, which his folks are selling.

A big event for anyone.

Flipping through old LPs by the likes of Stevie Wonder, Aretha Franklin and Earth, Wind & Fire in the cluttered basement — neatly realized by designers Rachel Hauck (set) and Marcus Doshi (lights) — memories bubble up faster than you can say betcha by golly, wow.

Domingo's experiences, whether it's his struggles with homosexuality or his mother Edie's mortality, aren't all that extraordinary.

What gives the show its unique groove is the star himself and his contagious enthusiasm for the soul, R&B and disco tunes that became the soundtrack to his life.

Domingo, who was impressive in "Passing Strange," is commanding and endearing, whether he's acting, singing along to the music (he asks you to, as well) or shaking what his mama (and choreographer Ken Roberson) gave him.

He's also an ace shape-shifter, morphing from playing himself to various relatives, with a change in his voice or body language or a telling gesture. Two fingers raised in a tight V comes to signal sassy big sister Averie, who was forever puffing Newports.

Domingo and director Tony Kelly have given the show a strong emotional bass line, but the story at times becomes repetitive. And they would have been wise to toss TMI moments about an outcast cousin's sex-for-pay antics and '70s icon Tom Jones.

A few out-of-tune moments don't overshadow that Domingo has the touch of a poet. It's evident when he recalls Edie's belief in the mystical power of a shimmering new moon and how his stepfather handles her illness. Both moments surge with enough soul to make adult eyes not just widen in appreciation, but to get a little misty.



Colman Domingo, who appeared in the hit 'Passing Strange,' in 'A Boy and His Soul,' which he wrote and directed.