

# Closer Than Ever

Good People Theatre Co. at  
Hollywood Piano Store

Reviewed by Bob Verini



Sara Stuckey, Jessie Withers, and David Zack

Book musicals and musical revues are two different animals, and it's a rare theater songwriter or team that can crank out both. Many of the very best — Rodgers and Hammerstein, Lerner and Loewe, Stephen Sondheim, and Frank Loesser come to mind—are responsible for brilliantly unified scores for world-class musical plays. Yet when you divorce their songs from their plots and link them together into a cabaret entertainment, the result is at best pedestrian and usually unfortunate: The lyrics don't work outside of the original characters, or the composers' distinctive style, applied to number after number, becomes too much of a good thing. Even Kander and Ebb's *And the World Goes 'Round*, which had a celebrated NY run and still gets performed often, is a shallow reflection of the *Cabarets* and *Zorbas* and *Chicagos* that it ransacks.

By contrast, the ill luck Richard Maltby Jr. (lyrics) and David Shire (music) have suffered with their book shows hasn't kept them from crafting some of the most-interesting and supple revue scores in many years. Though *Baby* (1983) has its admirers, it always struck me as three thin fertility narratives attempting, and failing, to make one significant thematic statement. And while they wrote almost three times as many songs as they needed for *Big* (1996), they never seemed to find the right combination of numbers that would bestow unique stage integrity on the Tom Hanks movie. Put simply, the musical's *raison d'être* seemed missing.

But in *Starting Here, Starting Now* (1976), and even more so in *Closer Than Ever* (1989), the team gives virtually every song its own *raison d'être*. The latter show, currently getting a fine local staging by Janet Miller and her Good People Theatre Company, is especially effective because it takes up so many of the personal issues Maltby and Shire attest as central to their own lives: the compromises of marriage; parenting; growing old as one's own parents grow even older; the disjunction between the dreams we held in youth and what we settle for today. Every song tells a self-contained story, and it's usually one with a rueful, or O. Henry—clever, twist at the tail.

There's not a dud among the 25-odd numbers as performed in the intimate, elegant side room of the Hollywood Piano store on Front Street in Burbank. Jessie Withers and Gabriel Kalomas are as scary as they are funny as two career builders, each insisting that the other mind the baby in "Fandango." They're joined by David Zack in enacting a pungent modern love triangle for "She Love Me Not." Zack teams up memorably with Sara Stuckey for the mellow "Another Wedding Song," ruminating on past heartbreaks and new hopes:

You're not my first, as well you know;  
Once before I left when marriage beckoned.  
But you're so much more than merely first—  
You are the first to be second.

All four get strong solo opportunities, but I think I will remember Stuckey best as "Miss Byrd," grabbing a stereotype (the quiet, businesslike administrative assistant with a wild life after hours) and nailing it with new verve. It's no surprise that Miller, one of our top choreographers, uses the space like buttah with just the right amount of movement. She should be staging the big, big shows on a regular basis, of course, but, in building Good People, she's scaling back for the future, and it hasn't impaired her inventiveness any.

NOTE: *Closer Than Ever's* musical director, Corey Hirsch, will accompany the LA Drama Critics Circle Awards show on March 16, which Bob Verini is producing.

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