

Marry Me a Little

Good People Theater Company at the Lillian Theater

Reviewed by Travis Michael Holder for ArtsInLA.com



Jessie Withers and David Laffey
Rich Clark Photography

While Craig Lucas was appearing in the original cast of Stephen Sondheim's classic *Sweeney Todd* in New York, the fertile brain of this actor-turned-playwright was sparked by a discussion listing the many songs from the prolific composer-lyricist's equally fertile brain that had been cut from some of his most successful creations before opening night. After approaching Sondheim with an idea and getting his blessing, Lucas and Norman Rene created this Off-Off-Broadway 1980 musical revue featuring all those lost songs and a few more from Sondheim's then-still-unproduced musical *Saturday Night*.

Directed by Rene and starring Lucas and Suzanne Henry, *Marry Me a Little* transferred from Off-Off to Off-Broadway, racking up a decent run and even more decent reputation over the years in regional theaters everywhere. Easy to produce—two actors, an accompanist, a minimal set—it was an inspired choice for Janet Miller and her Good People Theater Company to bring to the infamously bare-boned Hollywood Fringe Festival. Miller, her musical director-accompanist Corey Hirsch, and performers Jessie Withers and David Laffey can easily present their hour-long offering, pack up their bed and Hirsch's keyboard, and voila: the theater is ready for the next Fringe entry.

The premise was simple as Lucas and Rene saw it, interlacing all those abandoned Sondheim tunes together to create an ongoing song cycle made up of private thoughts conjured by two lonely strangers living in apartments 2C and 3C of a giant Manhattan apartment building, existing quietly in their otherwise unconnected isolation. As the story progresses, Withers and Laffey share the stage throughout but only infrequently share a song together, sung to each other as they occupy the same room, adhering to the authors' conceit that the two singles are singing their hearts out while alone in their separate studios.

This is perfect for the whimsical mind and smoothly modulated talents of director-choreographer Miller, who craftily weaves together the movements of her players as they share the same bed in different rooms until they accidentally meet, it appears, in the lobby or

elevator sometime during the performance. Beginning with the plaintive ballad “Saturday Night” from that aforementioned musical, their love story continues as the couple falls in love, eventually becomes disillusioned (living “One day of grateful/For six of regret”), and by “It Wasn’t Meant to Happen” (trimmed from *Follies*), retreats right back to their solitary individual galaxies in 2C and 3C.

Withers has a gorgeous, rich, near-operatic soprano that the notoriously discerning, cranky ol’ Uncle Stephen would appreciate. She is especially notable interpreting the title song and “There Won’t Be Trumpets,” originally sliced, respectively, from *Company* and *Anyone Can Whistle*, and gives a deliciously and suitably naughty spin to *Follies*’s lost “Can That Boy F...oxtro.” Laffey has a splendid voice as well, although on opening night he was dealing with vocal strain in the second half, making the biggest impression in “Multitude of Amys,” also cut from *Company*.

Hirsch does an exceptional job at the keyboards, although occasionally it would be nice for the accompaniment to soften a bit and not overpower the vocals, something that could be easily adjusted if the Fringe Festival were not such a hurried affair. The same is true for Withers and Laffey’s performances, which could also use a few more rehearsals and a little seasoning and sinking into the shoes of the characters.

Of course, *Marry Me a Little* is ultimately about Sondheim, whose tunes, even the ones that were scrapped, are arresting and whose lyrics are beyond compare with anyone else writing in the last 50 years or so. If anyone seems to understand loneliness and the fleeting qualities of love, it’s him.

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