

Stripped Down "Marry Me" Works Best In Duet

June 11, 2015 by [colin mitchell](#)



Jessie Withers and David Laffey in "Marry Me a Little". Photo: Good People Theater Company.

In trying to best and most accurately report my experience seeing Good People Theater Company's interpretation of the Sondheim review, *Marry Me a Little*, I first have to explain how I approach seeing a show, whether I'm writing about it or just hoping to enjoy it.

Don't worry it'll only take a second.

When I go see a show I want to know absolutely nothing about it before going in.

Now I know that's rather counter-intuitive to how most critics approach a show and I understand that it's simply not always possible to maintain such ignorance, you'll know the playwright, the company, someone in the show, maybe you heard something from a friend, but beyond that, I want nothing. I don't want any notes from the artistic director or the writer or the writer's uncle or the artistic director's personal trainer, I don't need to know that the lyricist survived Auschwitz or that the original production failed on Broadway. I don't want any of that.

I just want to come in, sit down and be told a good story.

And if you need notes and background information and historical perspective to accomplish that, rather than just making it happen on the stage, then you've already failed.

And when it comes to musicals, it's always best that I know even less. Cuz as a genre, it's not quite my cup of tea. There are musicals that I like tremendously no doubt, Hedwig, Chorus Line, Chicago, to name a few, but for the most part, I don't seek them out too often because of their penchant to ooze with layers of sleep inducing melodrama while often thinking that enthusiasm is a substitute for character development and plot.

And so this is how I went into the Lillian on Monday to see *Marry Me a Little*, yes it's a Sondheim review, got it, yes there will be lots of singing and not a jot of dialogue, got it, now tell me a story that makes me care.

Helmed by the ever-ebullient direction of Janet Miller, backed by musical director, Corey Hirsch on electric piano, who weaves an assured tapestry of Sondheim tunes culled from a variety of his shows, and performed tenderly by Jessie Withers and David Laffey, this story of two dreamers looking for love is nothing if not charming.

The loose framing of this piece is simple and stripped down; a man and a woman live in an apartment building, one floor separating them, unbeknownst to each other, on one Saturday night we are invited into their yearning made flesh, or rather, made musical; they find each other, they fall in love, or do they? and then then fall out of love, and move on alone, or do they? And it's all told through the songs written by the one and only Stephen Sondheim.

What I liked most about this piece is the surreal nature of it, whether intentional or not, the flights of fancy, the two dancing alone, coming together, kissing passionately, then retreating to their own beds, again alone, and yet not alone, thanks to the excellent directorial choice by Miller to have them sharing a single bed. It's a whimsical thing that could easily plunge into pure melodrama, but it doesn't, it works.

For me, Laffey was the stronger performer, he seemed more emotionally connected to his songs and more engaged with the audience, pulling us in, deeper and deeper into his lonely world and revealing his romantic heart and mind with each pitch perfect rendition. Not to say, Withers is a slouch, far from it, but for me, she seemed to be working a little harder to connect with the material, and there often seemed to be a distance between her and us in her solos that left me cold. Where Laffey warms, Withers often chills. Nevertheless, both are extremely strong singers and performers, though at times Withers seemed to be riding a wave of sharpness in her pitch and tone. Something that will hopefully be smoothed out as the runs continues.

But where this show absolutely soars and where all these quibbles dissolve like off notes in a shower, is when the two performers blend into duet. It is a sight to behold and heavenly to hear and it brought this writer to the brink of tears on more than one occasion. The chemistry between these two is palpable, crackling with desire and a sincerity that will make even the hardest of hearts soften, even if just a little. It was also an excellent choice – if it even was one – by producer/director Miller to cast actors who weren't department store mannequins in a Hollywood boutique. These are two real looking people, flesh on their bones, lines on their faces, casting two matinee idols would have detracted from the overall. Well done. More than likely these two were just the best for the roles, but whatever the reason, it emphasized the themes being explored perfectly.

While *Marry Me* may not rise (or sink) to the Fringy heights and depths of "edginess," what it does do is deeply explore loneliness and the unpredictable storm of falling in and out of love. Unfortunately, this is a musical, and a musical review at that and for this writer, bouncing from one emotional high point to another without any real character or plot development can at times make for an eye-rolling experience. But if one can surrender to the structure, it ultimately soothes rather than scars. I battled this impediment at times, but the moments were sporadic, ultimately the show held my attention from start to finish.

Now I can't say the experience has converted me into a bona fide musical lover, it hasn't, but it has brought me a greater appreciation for Sondheim's work – a dude that can make lyrics like "the Ritz, oh, it's so Schizo" work is all right with me – and once again proves that Good People Theater has officially staked their claim as one of the top companies putting up musicals that others might shy away from.

Here's hoping they try and set their sights on something new soon. I wouldn't want these guys to get comfortable or set in their ways. Yes, new musicals are a more risky enterprise, but a company like this should try and stretch and soar with something original or perhaps something commissioned from some local talent.

We'd all be the better for it. Until then, catch this and let the duets take you for a ride.

[Marry Me A Little](#) continues at the 2015 Hollywood Fringe Festival at the Lillian Theatre, 1076 Lillian Way LA. CA. 90038 with the following performances: