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Marry Me a Little

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First presented in 1980, "Marry Me a Little" offers an entertaining compilation of songs by master composer-lyricist Stephen Sondheim, which he originally wrote for other musicals. Each song was dropped, for one reason or another, from its premiere production.

Yet Sondheim's castaway tunes are sometimes better than other songwriters' prize compositions. The show is created and developed by accomplished playwright Craig Lucas (librettist for the current Broadway hit "An America in Paris" and for "The

Light in the Piazza"), in collaboration with Obie-winning director Norman Rene.

In this production from Good People Theatre Company, seasoned producer-director Janet Miller taps into the talents of excellent musical director/accompanist Corey Hirsch and two accomplished actor-singers (Jessie Withers and David Laffey), offering a solidly entertaining rendition of the show.

Musical evenings that are either lightly plotted or essentially without plot have frequently been successfully crafted from Sondheim's treasure trove of songs (such as "Putting it Together" and "Side By Side by Sondheim").

"Marry Me a Little" falls closest to the lightly plotted category, and is presented completely without dialog, as the songs, choreography, and stage action are combined to tell of an uncomplicated love attraction between two lonely tenants of an urban apartment building who are destined to meet. They are supposed to reside one floor apart, but we accept the convention of seeing them in the same apartment set-physically close, but emotionally remote. The overall effect of the show falls somewhere between ballet, song cycle, and musical revue.

Miller doesn't reinvent the wheel but brings energy and taste to this simply staged yet handsome and engaging production, trusting the virtues of the unpretentious material in a sometimes quite moving hour of song and dance. If memory serves correctly, she has enhanced the modest choreography that is usually offered with this musical, to lovely effect, gorgeously blending with the soaring Sondheim melodies, and skillful performances.

It's Saturday night in Manhattan, and two lonely singles living in the same building putter around their apartments expressing their yearnings for romance.

The overall mood and motif revolve around yearning and loneliness. Miller does a superb job of creating a dreamlike atmosphere, where duets can occur with the clear understanding that the characters are not physically together.

It's probably no accident that the best songs are those that resurfaced in later productions of the musicals for which they were written after their original excisions: Withers' stirring rendition of "There Won't Be Trumpets" (from "Anyone Can Whistle"), and the couple's gorgeous duet "All Things Bright and Beautiful" (from "Follies"), which was reinstated to productions of the show, but only as a lush orchestral theme.

Two songs from "Company," added back into revivals of the 1970 Sondheim masterpiece after many years, provide additional highlights here: Withers' "Marry Me a Little" aces the wit and melancholy of this fine number, while Laffey showcases his voice to stellar effect in "Multitude of Amys." In the delightful "Boy Can That Boy Foxtrot," Withers makes the most of the sassy and amusing number written for "Follies."

Robert Schroeder's handsome set design is appealing if quite simple, Kathy Gillespie's costumes are appealing, and Katherine Barrett's lighting deftly accommodates the play's shifting moods. As Miller's hour-long production sails by, it provides a very pleasant alternative to the typically experimental and sometimes abrasive Fringe Fest fare.

It's interesting to note that this musical was cleverly re-imagined as a gay romance at L.A.'s GLBT-focused Celebration Theatre in 1999. It appears Sondheim will forever be a man for all seasons.

"Marry Me a Little" continues through June 28 at the Lillian Theatre, 1076 Lillian Way, Hollywood. For tickets and information, visit the Hollywood Fringe Festival website at <http://www.hollywoodfringe.org/projects/2234>

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