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Review: Good People Theatre Company's Elegant **CLOSER THAN EVER**



Sara Stuckey, Gabriel Kalomas, Jessie Withers and David Zack.

Photos by Rich Clark

A tastefully elegant production of Maltby & Shire's *Closer Than Ever* brings the duo's beautiful and thought-provoking songs to life in the intimate performance space at Hollywood Piano in Burbank. It's a co-production between Good People Theater Company and Hollywood Piano; a partnership that means the audience gets the rare opportunity to hear the score played on a gorgeous 9½ foot Mason & Hamlin grand piano. That's a luxury most 99-seat theatre productions can't afford which makes it all the more satisfying to be able to experience it up close in a room with great acoustics and the incredibly talented Corey Hirsch making it sing.



ABOUT ME

I love musicals.

It doesn't matter if it moves you to laughter or to tears, a great musical is an intensely satisfying experience.

So welcome to
Musicals in LA
where you'll find the latest musical theatre

Closer Than Ever is a musical revue that plays like an ensemble cabaret show without the connecting patter, and although it first debuted Off-Broadway in 1989, it isn't a tired walk down memory lane. Rather, it is a timeless treatment of the thoughts and emotions that people experience in the course of a lifetime - love, loss, regret, aging, and the friendships that endure - in a relatable context for today.

In true Maltby/Shire fashion, the songs are the star. Each one is a self-contained story that is fully satisfying on its own. Put them all together and they have even more impact. Often both humor and pain exist side by side, as in the urban love story "She Loves Me Not," in which a trio (**Jessie Withers**, **David Zack** and **Gabriel Kalomas**) sings of unrequited love. The fragile lyric artfully wraps itself around the three singers in a most poignant fashion and the effect is stunning.

Director Janet Miller keeps the storytelling simple and direct while layering in subtext with a delicate hand. In this type of intimate venue it's all about what you can see in the actors' eyes while allowing the abrupt shifts in tone to lift the comedy and let it surprise the audience. Under Miller and musical director Hirsch's guidance, the company easily succeeds, blending four unique voices into a lovely ensemble with each actor still retaining his or her own personality.

Zack is the pop tenor whose best number is "One of the Good Guys." He allows the story's narrative to reveal its quiet drama without overplaying his hand, while Kalomas has a more classical presence but also does some great comic sparring with Sara Stuckey in the hilarious break-up song "You Wanna Be My Friend" and the poignantly funny "There" about a couple's disintegrating relationship. Stuckey's natural sweetness is perfect for "Miss Byrd," which she delivers with a knowing wink. Stuckey also shines in the conversational songs that deal with more serious topics like "Life Story" where she considers the choices she's made and "It's Never That Easy/I've Been Here Before," a girl talk medley with Withers about relationships.





The clear standout performance however is Withers in what has always been my favorite song in the show, “Patterns.” Her interpretation is full of nuance and you can see the thoughts and images flicker across her face and vanish almost as quickly as they appear. From a whisper to a roar, hers is a rich vocal instrument that cuts through with clarity and a unique

resonance that picks up overtones from the piano that ring in the air. Listen for it in the song and you’ll hear it almost like an echo vibrating between the musical phrases. It really is quite a wonderful surprise.

She too has a way with comedy, as you’ll hear in “The Bear, the Tiger, the Hamster and the Mole,” a song that had been cut from Maltby & Shire’s musical, *Baby*, that would be the impetus for the writers to create *Closer Than Ever*. In “Back on Base” she turns up the heat with **Jordan Lamoureux** (at this performance) on upright bass in a jazzy arrangement that sizzles with intensity and provides plenty of opportunity to do some sensual scatting.

All in all, this is an elegant two hour evening of storytelling through song that is as musically satisfying a production as you’ll find anywhere in L.A. Catch it now through March 15th.

