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CLOSER THAN EVER

STAGEscenela WOW!

Four of the most gloriously-voiced actor-singers in town, clever musical staging by the Ovation-winning Janet Miller, over two-dozen of Richard Maltby, Jr. and David Shire's most melodious and insightfully worded songs, and a superbly played 9.5-foot-long concert grand add up to a thoroughly captivating *Closer Than Ever* at Burbank's Hollywood Piano. Lighting may be rudimentary, the set may consist simply of a red velvet curtain, four stools, and said piano, and the folding-chair seating as back-challengingly uncomfy as it gets, but oh the performances! Oh the songs!



Unrequited love ("She Loves Me

Not"), obsessive love ("What Am I Doin'?"), extramarital love ("One Of The Good Guys"), love in the afternoon ("Miss Byrd"), star-crossed love ("There"), love the second time around ("Another Wedding Song"), and sexual love ("Back On Base")—love and life is what Maltby & Shire's 1989 off-Broadway revue is all about, with not a second of spoken dialog to interrupt music and lyrics.



Those in the mood for the comedic

will relish "You Want To Be My Friend" (a woman's outraged response when the man she

likes expresses a desire to just be friends), "The Bear, The Tiger, The Hamster, And The Mole" (a discussion of sex among the species), and "Dating Again" (an anthem about our national obsession with finding Mr. or Ms. Right).

Those in search of the introspective will relish "Life Story" (a woman's reflections on the effects of her divorce), "Patterns" (a look back at paths taken and not taken), "If I Sing," (a son's loving expression of debt to his father), "I've Been Here Before" (a woman's recollections of one bad romantic choice after another), and "The March Of Time" (the entire cast's musings on aging).

Contemporary topics are also spotlighted—the changing roles of men and women in "Three Friends," couples balancing marriage and children in "Fandago," and adult children caring for aging parents in "Fathers Of Fathers."

There's even a teensy bit of gay-inclusiveness in "She Loves Me Not," which features a woman and two men singing about their unrequited loves, one of the men joining the woman in singing "*He* loves me not."



In other words, if it's an experience you and I or anyone else has ever had or will ever have in life, there's probably a Closer Than Ever song that will resonate.

Performers don't come any more gifted than Gabriel Kalomas, Sara J. Stuckey, Jessie Withers, and David Zack, and each gets his or her own moment to shine in solos, duets, trios, and full-cast quartets.



The evening's brightest highlights

include the amusing "What Am I Doing?" which has Zack balancing precariously "up on the roof and out in the rain" and poised to jump. Stuckey rages against a not-so likely lover in "You Want To Be My Friend," while Kalomas and Withers' "Fandango" features a couple of young marrieds juggling work and (quite literally) baby-raising demands.



A bespectacled Withers lectures deliciously on animal (and human) species in "The Bear, The Tiger, The Hamster, and The Mole," after which Stuckey delights as outwardly straight-laced realtor "Miss Byrd," who's just returned from a secret lunchtime sex romp.

Still, it's Closer Than Ever's more introspective numbers that pack the most powerful punch and allow all four performers' vocal artistry to dazzle. Stuckey and Zack are a couple celebrating love the second time around in "Another Wedding Song," Withers solos a sublime "Patterns," Stuckey does the same in "Life Story," and the duo blend sopranos quite exquisitely indeed in "It's Never That Easy" and "I've Been Here Before," performed individually and then in counterpoint.



Tenors don't get any more tenor-rific than Kalomas's in "I'll Get Up Tomorrow Morning" or Zack's in "One Of The Good Guys," and having musical director-accompanist Corey Hirsch vocal solo "If I Sing," a pianist son's eulogy to an adored father, is a stroke of divine directorial inspiration. Later, when all three men blend voices to sing about three generations of fathers in "Fathers Of Fathers," the effect is simply sublime.

As for full cast harmony, it doesn't get more stunning than in the opening number "Doors," the Act One closer "I Wouldn't Go Back," and the gorgeous title tune which ends the evening on an emotional, inspiring note.



Joining the supremely gifted Hirsch throughout the evening is bassist Brenton Kossak, who gets his own centerstage instrumental solo opposite vocalist Stuckey in the jazzy, sexy "Back On Bass." (Jordan Lamoureux plays bass at certain performances.)

Costume designers Kathy Gillespie and Barbara Weisel give each performer a single, casual-chic outfit to wear.

Closer Than Ever is the latest 99-seat plan production from producer-director Janet Miller's Good People Theater Company (in partnership this time with Hollywood Piano), and three of its four cast members appear courtesy of the currently endangered plan. Though the company's usual Hollywood digs at the Lillian would have provided considerably more comfortable seating and professional lighting, there would likely not have been a nearly ten-foot long concert grand centerstage.

Rebecca Schroeder is stage manager.



A revue that inspires its audience to reflect on their own lives while providing musical entertainment in equal measure, *Closer Than Ever* may be celebrating its twenty-sixth birthday, but at Hollywood Piano it is Fresher Than Ever.



Hollywood Piano, 323 N Front St, Burbank. Through March 15. Saturdays at 3:00 and 8:00. Sundays at 3:00.

www.GoodPeopleTheaterCo.org

—Steven Stanley