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THEATER

'Married' with many benefits

New show bonds satire, song and style into hilarious comedic whole

By ROBERT TRUSSELL
The Kansas City Star



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Ginette Rhodes and Todd Alan Crain put the audience in stitches as a naïve couple who marry young, with hilarious results, in "Married Alive!" at the American Heartland Theatre.

Skit comedy isn't my favorite kind of theater and it may not be yours, but I can guarantee one thing: If you stick with "Married Alive!" you'll laugh out loud. If you don't someone should check your pulse.

The world premiere at the American Heartland Theatre benefits from inventive direction by Paul Hough (assisted by Steven Eubank), a gifted cast and an imaginative scenic design by Del Unruh. Writer Sean Grennan and composer Leah Okimoto have concocted a satirical reflection on the trials of marriage in modern America — everything from repellant in-laws to recalcitrant teenage offspring — while still leaving room for the occasional moment of honest tenderness and bittersweet sentiment.

The show begins with a wedding between two naïve young people and concludes with a seasoned couple renewing their vows, a neat book-ending that provides a satisfying closing of the circle. The material that falls between the opening and the final curtain varies rather widely in tone and at times ranks as some of the most acerbic comedy Heartland theatergoers have ever seen.

The young couple is played by Todd Alan Crain, a skilled comic actor, and Ginette Rhodes, whose formidable bag of tricks is put to good use as she clears the show's structural hurdles with cool efficiency and flashes of brilliance.

Our mature couple is played by the always-interesting James Wright, who exercises his acute comic timing (often earning the show's biggest laughs) and Kathy Santen, whose versatility is clear as she deftly moves from classy elegance to low, bawdy comedy without missing a beat.

Okimoto's music sometimes falls into predictable "show music" patterns — a little Stephen Sondheim here, a little

Claude-Michel Schönberg there — but at times her creative instincts and Grennan's combine with impressive results. The show's first real attention-grabber is "Fly to Me," a heartfelt ballad performed by Crain and Rhodes as a young two-career couple who spend too much time apart.

Similarly, "It Isn't Important" is a lament by a lonely wife whose husband's career is all-consuming. The number is quiet and brooding and performed impeccably by Santen. The first act closes with a romp called "Oh, Knocked Up!" that becomes a high-energy riff spoofing tent-revival music, with Rhodes handling the role of "preacher."

Act 2 begins with a bang as Crain and Rhodes appear as a young couple on their way to her parents' house for the holidays. The song is "Ding Dong," and its chirpy, Christmassy melody line stands in stark contrast to the dysfunctional family behavior on view. Wright and Santen are the parents determined to pour as much alcohol down everyone's gullets as possible, and Rhodes plays twin sisters, one of whom puts the moves on her brother-in-law.

Musical director Anthony T. Edwards provides the single-piano accompaniment on stage, and it never seems too thin. Indeed, there would be no clear benefit to outfitting this piece with a full band. The show's strength is in the unpredictable wit found both in Grennan's lyrics and Okimoto's musical choices.

It should be noted that Act 1 closes with one of the wildest visual gags I've seen on the Heartland stage. Don't worry. I won't give it away. But it had the Wednesday night audience in stitches.

Verdict: This show seems likely to have legs, as they like to say in the biz.

Review

'Married Alive!'

■ **When:** Wednesday, March 8 (runs through April 16)

■ **Where:** American Heartland Theatre

■ **Attendance:** 350 (approx.)

■ **Tickets:** \$17-\$32.50; call (816) 842-9999 or go to www.ahtkc.com .

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