

Entertainment

Thursday, March 23, 2006

News

Ball and Change

The Heartland hurries us through the war zone of matrimony.

"It's a wonderful thing, marriage," once opined Jesco White, West Virginia's almost-famous dancing outlaw, from the steps of his trailer. "There's love in it, and there's happiness in it. But there's also sorrow, hatred and madness."

You'd never be able to drag a gas-huffing sumbitch like White to Crown Center, much less into a sit-down theater such as the American Heartland. But I thought of him throughout *Married Alive!*, Sean Grennan and Leah Okimoto's likable new musical-comedy. It's gratifying that chunks of real sorrow and madness marble all the farcical sing-alongs and uplift of the final act.

No hatred, though. Theaters this profitable are as comfortable with dark, challenging themes as Matt Blunt is with lap dances.

Grennan digs into what folks do after "I do." We get two couples, one just hitched and one just bitching. Diane and Ron (Kathy Santen and James Wright), the older, battle-scarred veterans who have no illusions about matrimony, are not only unable to hold their peace at the wedding that kicks off the show — they actually burst into the first number (the jaunty "Stupid in Love") during the awkward moment when the preacher calls for objections. Years and scenes pass quickly. Passion sputters, kids bound into the world, and soon, sunny newlyweds Paul and Erin (Todd Alan Crain and Ginette Rhodes) become indistinguishable from their grizzled counterparts.

All this is told in an inventively staged string of comic sketches and songs that range from sweet to cutting to distressingly retrograde: "It Starts With Socks," a disposable number whose minor-key paranoia recalls chase scenes from old horror movies, warns men that wives (and their gay stylist friends) will dress them up in teal and linen. Fortunately, most songs fare better. The early ballad "Fly to Me" won me over. The daft gospel workout "Oh, Knocked Up!" inspired cries of "Oh, my God!" right before intermission. But best might be the will-he-get-it-up comic duet "O' Darlin,'" an old-fashioned rock-and-roll belter that finds Santen dolled up in schoolgirl skirts and moaning that her "cupcake needs filling."

The cast is excellent. Wright, one of Kansas City's most reliable pleasures, is a dead ringer here for a boss from a 1950s sitcom. At first it seemed to me that Wright had been given all the best lines, but soon I realized that he simply makes the most of his part. He steadies a script that veers without warning from insight to shtick. As his wife, Kathy Santen shows off great legs and even greater comic timing. Hard to tell whether this is intentional, but this older couple smolders with sexiness that the youngsters — cute and funny as they are — can't muster.

The play's blackout structure keeps things moving. Snaking around the set are colored tiles printed with scene titles; after each sketch, the theater darkens, the board flares up,

and, to the sound of bleeps and bloops that recall shouts of "Big money, no Whammies," light flashes through the board until the next title is selected.

Act II opens with a long holiday farce riotous enough to forgive Grennan a certain vagueness of character — these couples seem to be intended to be (white) men and women in general instead of men and women we might know. The good stuff is almost outweighed by some undistinguished ballads and a pair of harebrained scenes that use smoke and gunfire to compare raising kids to life in a war zone. But what works, works. *Married Alive!* isn't perfect, but committing to it doesn't mean that you're settling.