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Starry-eyed, stupid art of marriage

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By **DOROTHY ANDRIES** | MUSIC CRITIC

A new musical that affirms the institute of marriage? How quaint, how antiquated, how -- well, stupid. In fact, "Stupid in Love" is the opening song in "Married Alive!" now running at the Marriott Theatre in Lincolnshire. It good-naturedly chides people stupid enough to get all starry-eyed and marry, and, somehow, through thick and thin, stupid enough to end up still loving one another.

The show, with book and lyrics by Sean Grennan and music by Leah Okimoto, charts a decade in the life of two married couples. The young pair is just exchanging their vows, the other has been married for 15 years and can't help snickering during the wedding at the couple's naive view of what marriage will be like.

The Marriott show has a dynamite quartet for this show, which is actually a series of short vignettes, deftly directed by Vicky Bussert. Kelly Sullivan and David Larsen are the newlyweds Erin and Paul; Gene Weygandt and Kathy Santen are the seasoned couple Ron and Diane.

Two musicians, Roberta Duchak and Kevin Disch, play keyboards at opposite ends of the square stage and songs burst out all over this production.

Of course, there is sex -- hot and heavy between the young ones and a little more labor intensive for the older pair. Handled with humor, the scenes are more PG than R-rated.

The songs are easy on the ears and a few are really beautiful. Of particular charm is "Fly to Me." Unlike classic songs comparing love to a flight to outer space, these lyrics express the woe of the newlyweds whose separate careers keep them apart 25 days a month. The number is gracefully staged, with Sullivan and Larsen each alone in an airline seat on a turntable which keeps circling as their voices blend in lovely harmony. It could easily be a stand-alone ballad.

Each player has a chance to shine. Sullivan does a star turn when Erin and Paul go to a marriage counselor, and she embarks on a rapid-fire monologue that goes on for minutes at a crack. (Her bit brought immediate applause during a recent performance.) She also packs a punch with the hilarious number "Oh, Knocked Up," as she counters Paul's contention that they can't afford to have a child.

During a dysfunctional family Christmas at Paul's in-laws, Larsen exhibits real comic ability as he beats off the advances of Erin's twin (played by Sullivan) and becomes tipsy drinking his father-in-law's endless scotches and his mother-in-law's spiked eggnog. The in-laws are played by Santen and Weygandt.

Larsen touches our hearts with his ballad "The Lucky One," in which he sings about his love for his wife and newborn child.

Kathy Santen is glowing as Diane, the grown-up woman who still has her moments of doubts and uncertainty. Her number "It Isn't Important," expresses the loneliness that's part of a long-time marriage, and her duet with Weygandt "We Haven't Come So Far" is a sometimes rueful look backward at a lifetime together.

Weygandt's plays Ron, the all-around good guy, and he moves like a pro through humor and sentiment, stealing the show at its conclusion.

Two scenes are staged as if the household was under sniper fire, literally. For Erin and Paul it is when the baby has been crying all night. "Tired? That's when you get five hours sleep," Erin shrieks. "I sleep when I blink."

For Diane and Ron it is when their two children are adolescents and communication between the generations has broken down completely. (Solution? Send the kids off to summer camp.)

Those scenes are the only misfires -- no pun intended, straining a little too hard to convey the siege mentality that couples experience at various times in their lives.

One very short scene, however, was perfection. Erin and Paul are moving into their first house, Diane and Ron have sold theirs. Both actions go on simultaneously with conversations almost identical and the women saying the very same words, in unison. It was as tight and brilliant as a little Bach fugue.

There's a lot of truth in this show, which the writers admit is based on many of their own marital experiences. We'll let the ending be a surprise, but rest assured that through it all, the pairs have remained "Stupid In Love" -- which, of course, is not the least bit stupid.

'MARRIED ALIVE!'

Marriott Theatre in Lincolnshire. 1 and 8 p.m. Wednesdays, 8 p.m. Thursdays and Fridays, 5 and 8:30 p.m. Saturdays and 1 and 5 p.m Sundays through Aug. 30. \$42. Dinner/theater packages available. (847) 634-0200 or www.marriotttheatre.com.



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