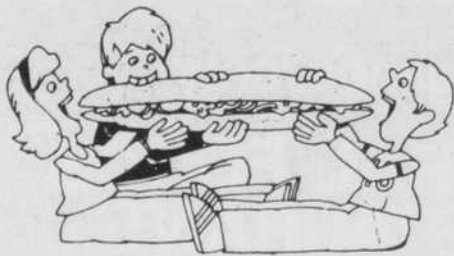


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Performing, on stage

Play is not sensitive in dealing with gays

The University's Carnival Theatre may unintentionally provoke angry responses to its current production of "Side By Side By Sondheim," directed by Janet Descutner, a University dance associate professor.

The purely escapist "Side By Side" is presented as a revue of songwriter Stephen Sondheim's popular works for Broadway shows. There is no plot or serious theme to wrangle with. The problem it gets into, in pursuit of providing a good time, is that gay people become the brunt of jokes based more on stereotypes than wit.

The worst offense — which a responsible theater would never include, or would handle with much more sensitivity — occurs during the climactic song-and-dance medley at the show's end. Actor Douglas Knight plays a gay man in grossly stereotypical manner, singing (out of context) lines which Sondheim intended for a woman. "I feel pretty, I feel pretty," he whinnies, arms floating limply about.

In response to his carrying on, performers Laureen Higby and Nancy Julian respond with two out-of-context lines from Sondheim's "A Boy Like That":

"A boy like that," they sing, frowning at that boy, "would kill your brother. Stick to your own kind!"

Such jokes rely on hatred and prejudice for their appeal. The message to an audience is equally unattractive.

But the director, when asked how the show gains from such insensitive attacks, responded: "It got a laugh."

Indeed, it did. A roar.

However, it is not entertaining to those in the audience who are being told, by such jabs, that they are not welcome among people supposedly not

of their "own kind." Carnival Theatre may seem to tell gay people its entertainment is not meant for them. This impression, whether intentional or the result of oversight, would never be presented by any competent theater responsible to its public.

Sadly, these cheap shots are the show's most successful attempts to get reaction from the audience. This is no fault of Sondheim's compositions, which range from lively and comic to sensitive and moving. Rather, the failure to engage the audience results from a shortage of genuine humor and from poor choices of ways to bring the entertainment off.

For instance, Descutner's direction least utilizes what would seem to be her obvious strength — dance. Too many weak attempts at sight gags and slapstick keep her performers standing about, or taking meaningless strides left or right. And this while the music is begging for exciting movement.

Not helping matters is designer Jerry Williams' set. Monotonous, monochromatic planes of posters, pianos and bar stools pile from deep in the stage out toward the audience. This leaves little room for performers to move, even if they wanted to. It also sets a serious, sophisticated tone more suitable for opera than a Sondheim revue that begins with the song, "A Comedy Tonight."

However, credit must go to performer Shane Henry's able attempts to add some sorely lacking zaniness. In the right environment, Henry's agile embellishments would be a hit. Too bad, they seem out of place amid the stuffiness here.

The high point in the show comes when Douglas Knight merely sits and sings "Anyone Can Whistle." His presentation, unforced and simple, succeeds in this otherwise encroaching set. It is a nice moment in a production that otherwise needs some tending to.

"Side By Side By Sondheim" continues Friday and Saturday, and again August 2 and 11. Admission is \$5 — no discounts for students — or \$3.50 weeknights.

By Douglas Pyle

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