

 Cincy Beat


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Everyone fusses that the holidays start earlier every year. It's not yet Thanksgiving and the Playhouse has a perfect show for Valentine's Day. In fact, if you're thinking that the musical *I Love You, You're Perfect, Now*

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Change might have a glimmer of holiday merriment, you'll be disappointed. There's nary a Christmas carol sung, a wreath hung nor a bell rung.

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And it doesn't matter.

I Love You will be a big hit for the Playhouse during the November and December holidays simply because it's about love and marriage, a perfect outing for a first date, for newlyweds, for weary parents, and for seniors together for years. The show pleasantly and humorously -- and occasionally poignantly -- explores the relationships while highlighting the differences between women and men.

Felix E. Cochren's set is framed with oversized tongue-in-cheek Victorian greeting card images -- roses, sweethearts and turtledoves, not to mention a few sculpted cupids -- although behind the two musicians who sit on a balcony over the stage (pianist Louis F. Goldberg and violinist Dorothy Han, who show us a bit of their own funny relationship at the beginning of Act 2), we see a hint of the contemporary, urban steel and glass.

The set plays an important part in the quick pace of this show (it's two acts in two hours and 10 minutes, but feels faster), thanks to a small revolving track that lets actors, props and set pieces wheel onstage and off with minimum downtime. Under Dennis Courtney's fleet direction, the actors come and go through an amazing array of costume and wig changes, too.

Altered States

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Cincy Scene**


The cast of four -- Heather Ayers, Brad Little, Ginette Rhodes and Jamison Stern -- mix and match seamlessly, playing characters from nerds and geeks to studs and babes (in fact, Ayers and Stern do that in one number). The ensemble portray twentysomethings stumbling toward love and lonely seniors doing the same. The approach is usually comic, both monologues and comic sketches, such as all four tooling around in a car -- an angry dad, a second-guessing mom, and antsy kids in the back seat -- using four rolling desk chairs as their "vehicle."



Little is especially powerful, a Broadway talent almost -- but not quite -- too large for the tiny Shelterhouse stage. He appeared in *The Phantom of the Opera* in New York and played the lead role on tour, including a stop at the Aronoff Center in 1997. But each of the four actors has his or her moments to shine.



After a brief prologue in which the ensemble gets dressed for a date -- and tries to suppress anxieties -- Little and Rhodes open the show with a fast-forward relationship. Next Ayers and Stern are a young pair, four dates into a relationship and still feeling their way along. Stern and Little play outrageous boors in a restaurant while Ayers and Rhodes bemoan the "Single Man Drought." Little and Rhodes pair up for a hilarious number, "Tear Jerk," about a supposedly macho guy going to a chick flick.



The show is not without its weaker moments. An angst-ridden dinner with parents is too caricatured and drawn out, and an infomercial about legal recourse for bad dates was simply crass. A screaming "Scared Straight" parody that frightens an unlikely pair into a relationship was lacking in humor. (For those with gentler sensibilities, it should be pointed out that the show's language, here and elsewhere, can be oh-so-contemporary and colloquial.)



The second act moves from dating to love after marriage. After an act opener in which Rhodes reviews all her bad bridesmaid dresses, we meet Little and Ayers as sappy new parents whose friend (Stern) looks at them like they're aliens. Rhodes, Stern and Ayers give different perspectives on "Waiting" (for a husband watching ESPN, for a shopping wife, in line for a ladies room). There are serious moments, too, watching Ayers as a divorcée who records a candid and revealing dating video. Stern asks "Shouldn't I Be Less In Love With You?" while his wife (Rhodes) is lost in the morning newspaper. And Little and Rhodes play widowed strangers -- "You have the look of someone who spent their life with someone" -- whose paths cross awkwardly and then lovingly at a funeral home, "I Can Live With That."

I suspect audiences will see this show -- and probably want to come back again. They'll love it. It's perfect.

I LOVE YOU, YOU'RE PERFECT, NOW CHANGE
continues at the Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park's
Robert S. Marx Theatre through Dec. 23.

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