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Thursday, November 09, 2000

'I Love You' strikes chord with homegrown director

By Jackie Demaline
The Cincinnati Enquirer

Light-hearted musical revues have become a holiday tradition in Playhouse in the Park's Shelterhouse Theatre. The box office has cha-chinged for girl groups and blue suede shoes and an old-time mountain Christmas Eve.

This holiday season, the subject will be one especially dear to our hearts: the lighter side of dating and mating as observed by a black-out sketch and song revue (and long-playing off-Broadway hit) *I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change*.

"It used to be so simple," director Dennis Courtney says, sighing. (That would have been around the cave man era.) "There were roles for men and roles for women. But the externals have gotten complicated. We've been so busy doing everything but working on how to make relationships work."

Mr. Courtney notes that he's as guilty as everybody else. "I'm just doing, doing, doing, not *being*."

If Mr. Courtney's name sounds familiar to longtime Cincinnatians, it's because he spent his high school and college years here, and when he was a student at Anderson High School in 1975 he was the U.S. figure skating's junior national champion.

You didn't see him at the Olympics in 1976 ("I wouldn't have been ready") or in 1980 because he opted for college instead. After graduating as Anderson's valedictorian in 1976, he enrolled as a pre-med student at the University of Cincinnati.

"That was the sensible thing to do," he laughs now. But he kept wandering past College-Conservatory of Music, hearing the singing and dancing, and in no time he'd changed his major.

Cut ahead a few years and CCM grad Dennis Courtney

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landed a string of Broadway shows, including *Peter Pan* with Sandy Duncan, and *Starlight Express*, for which he donned roller skates and played the Taft Theatre back in 1986.

He sidestepped into directing when a producer of a touring show kept begging him to try staging.

"No, I'm an actor," Mr. Courtney kept saying, but the producer continued to nag him, pointing out that Mr. Courtney hung out at everyone else's rehearsals, a sure sign of a budding director.

Finally, he said yes, "and I realized it was what I should be doing."

He'd never met or worked with Ed Stern, Playhouse producing artistic director, "but in this business everyone knows everyone." He got the gig.

Of the many things Mr. Courtney likes about *I Love You...* "what's novel is that it's about contemporary themes but done in old music hall sketch style. It's a nice marriage of old showbiz and contemporary musical theater."

And he can't argue with the show's theme. "What makes us all the same is our need to be with someone," Mr. Courtney says. "You recognize the characters. It's, 'Oh my god, that's Uncle Maury.' 'Oh, that's you two years ago.' 'Oh, that's me.'"

"The show doesn't pretend to have any answers, but it says it's OK that none of us have the answers."

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