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'I Love You' spreads the joy

Theater review

By Jackie Demaline
jdemaline@enquirer.com

There's a reason "I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change," the affable revue about the life cycle of romantic relationships, has been running off-Broadway for 12 years. It makes people happy.

"I Love You" was last at Playhouse in the Park in 2000; it's back in the Shelterhouse for this holiday season in a smart production that invites audiences to just sit back and enjoy, no thought required, forget your troubles (should you have any), at least for two and a-half hours.

On a stage dominated by photos of unfurling, dewy red roses – on the floor, the rear walls, even paneling the tiny balcony where pianist and violinist provide accompaniment, an acting ensemble of four – two men, two women – do a fine job delivering the show's bright songs and sketches.

The first act is about finding Mr. or Ms. Right, through first dates, bad dates, breaking up, making it to the altar; the second act is about what comes next – marriage, parenthood, family life, divorce, getting older.

The actors – Pamela Bob, Holly Davis, Michael Dean Morgan and Bob Walton – play well together, from the first moment they come on stage, each of their characters preparing for a first date.

The show is best when it's being funny; lots of situations – like an entire relationship being jammed into a first date, and later a family outing on the road, hit all the right notes but in a signature way.

When "I Love You" ventures into heartfelt territory, its ideas get smaller instead of bigger. Even when some of the sketches are lighter-than-lightweight, director Dennis Courtney (who also directed eight years ago) helms "I Love You" easily through the shallows and his choreography is a hoot throughout.

A turntable makes a dizzying number of costume and prop changes run smoothly – and invites the question whether Brian Mehring (resident at Ensemble Theatre) is the go-to set designer when Playhouse needs a turntable and flowers in the Shelterhouse. (Mehring worked with very similar elements on "Five Years Apart.") Kudos to costumer David Kay Mickelsen for a vast wardrobe ranging from bad bridesmaid dresses to truly awful golf plaids.

The actors do a nice job changing character from sketch to sketch. Both women can belt out their songs. Davis arcs from no-nonsense professionals to old ladies to a character who sounds a lot like Sarah Palin, for a little extra fun; Bob gets to show off her acting chops as a crazy lady (newly divorced) taping a profile for a video date.

Morgan is a real chameleon from sketch to sketch, which is great fun, and Walton has the familiarity of Everyguy, which gives "I Love You" a comfy anchor.

"I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change," through Dec. 31, Playhouse in the Park Thompson Shelterhouse, Eden Park. 513-421-3888 and www.cincyplay.com. Find more local theater news and reviews at www.CinStages.com