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Friday, November 10, 2000

Theater review: 'I Love You'

Great cast sparkles in sitcom-like musical

By Jackie Demaline
The Cincinnati Enquirer

I don't know about you, but national politics have provided me with all the drama I can take this week. A night of near-mindless entertainment feels just right, especially when it comes with an eye-poppingly good cast.

I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change is getting its regional premiere in a holiday run at Playhouse in the Park. The first act is like a singing *Seinfeld*, the second act is a musical *Everybody Loves Raymond*, the latter half in particular is worth leaving the Barco lounge for.

But maybe I think that because I always thought the *Seinfeld* sidekicks were tiresomely neurotic and unpleasant, but I'm all alone on that one. Everybody else is going to love *I Love You's* first act, which goes, in comedy sketch and song, from first date to a walk down the aisle.

The women are desperate, the men are bottom of the barrel, the cast is delicious as they quick-change their way through a rogue's gallery of losers.

In the warm and fuzzy second act, the foursome enact the stages of adulthood: marriage, parenthood, waiting (for oh so many things), empty nesting, surviving.

Ginetta Rhodes is the perky short-haired blonde with the big voice who can play little old ladies and little girls and busy career women, an exhausted wife/mom who'd like to remember what sex is. She also makes a show-stopping bridesmaid.

Heather Ayers is the long haired blonde with the big voice, a babe who can play a non-babe, a googie-talking new mommy, and a neighborhood of suburban wives.

Brad Little, total Leading Man material, infuses all his roles with brio, whether he's a real man at a sissy-girl movie, a car-loving guy on a family trip or a charmer of an elderly gentleman attempting a pick-up at a funeral parlor.

They're all welcome new talent on the Playhouse stage. Jamison Stern, a veteran of *The Compleat Wrks of Wilm Shakspr* shows his comic range as a non-stud, a harried husband, a bored teenager, and does nicely by a reflective (if manipulative) soliloquy set in late middle age.

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WORLD NEWS

Joe DiPietro wrote the book and lyrics. The skits could slide into a sitcom episode with barely a change of verb tense. The songs, with Jimmy Roberts' music set to Mr. DiPietro's lyrics are agreeable if ot memorable. Of course, they're supposed to be agreeable not memorable. That's why it's near-mindless entertainment.

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When the material leaves something to be desired, they soar above it and carry it along. The Playhouse has found a talented director in Dennis Courtney, who has a nice sense of comedy, an impeccable sense of musical and makes it all seem bright as a new penny.

Felix Cochren's set is a bare cabaret stage, tiny combo playing above, trimmed with cupids and Victorian posies and roses and cleverly chosen depictions of romance through history.

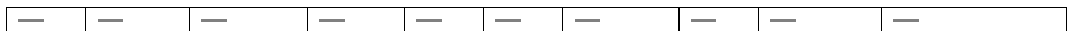
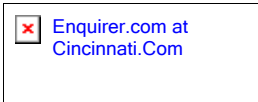
Just as clever are David Kay Mickelsen's costumes, which identify the character of their wearers as accurately as fingerprints. The his-and-her shirts on the suburban marrieds are priceless.

I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change, through Dec. 23, Playhouse in the Park Shelterhouse, 421-3888.

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