

FORUM (FORUM & FOCUS) • Mar. 06, 2009 Where Breaking Up Is Delightful to Do

#### FORUM COLUMN

By Alan H. Friedenthal "Divorce! The Musical" is infinitely more enjoyable than "Divorce, The Judicial Assignment."

The latter is playing in more than 40 courtrooms across Los Angeles County. The former is delighting audiences at the Hudson Mainstage Theatre on Santa Monica Boulevard in Hollywood.

Jerry Herman's "Hello, Dolly!" is to matchmaking as Harvey Schmidt and Tom Jones' "I Do, I Do" is to marriage, and Erin Kamler's "Divorce! The Musical" belongs right up there in the pantheon.

Kamler, who multitasks the authorship for music, book and lyrics of this 75-minute show, which plays without an intermission, is clearly a musical descendant of Dorothy Fields and Betty Comden and a disciple of composer Stephen Sondheim.

Kamler drew her inspiration for the creation of "Divorce! The Musical" from her own experiences with the process.

"I needed a way to process and to heal," said Kamler. "So I decided to write a musical that exposed divorce as the powerful, destructive phenomenon it is: a social and legal process that treats people like wheels in a cog. I wanted to talk about greedy lawyers who instigate conflict in order to drag cases out and rake in the money."

Gabrielle Wagner and Leslie Stevens as those greedy lawyers, respectively from the Westside and Sherman Oaks, are hysterical in their two numbers together: "Lawyer Letters" and the side-splitting "Best Friends," a number reminiscent of Lionel Bart's Fagin from "Oliver!" and his youthful charges plotting their future financial fortunes.

In addition to the aptly named lawyers, Laureen Grub and Lisa Groper, Wagner and Stevens contribute in other roles: Wagner as the therapist and the minister and Stevens as Annie Hughes, the petitioner's mother.

In a nearly show-stopping performance, Gregory Franklin shines as The Mediator done up as a game show host presiding over the mediation process, reminding the contestants that from there, it's straight to court. Franklin, doubling as the petitioner's father, alongside Stevens' mother, regales the audience in "We Stuck It Out," a ribald number that never would have made it in 1966's "I Do, I Do."

The irony of a petitioner and respondent being named Penny and Rich will not be lost on any audience member, whether they have personally experienced divorce, litigated it or adjudicated it.

Penny and Rich are a deeply self-absorbed 30-something couple. He's a successful physician; she's a struggling actress. Rich wants to start a family, Penny wants to pursue her career. This is a deal-breaker for him. This story would be enhanced by the inclusion of children, as the vast majority of dissolutions involve children. But this is not a part of Kamler's story.

Lowe Taylor, a sweet beauty, and Rick Segall, have a perfect chemistry as they spend one number getting married ("Til Death Do Us Part") and 18 numbers getting divorced. Their best duet, "Half," speaks of being half-lovers and half-friends, but subtly telegraphs the property disputes yet to come.

Working within the confines of a 99-seat equity waiver theater posed no obstacles to production values that lend the feel of a major Broadway production. The space is small, but Rick Sparks' direction and musical staging (choreography) are so deft, the audience never notices that they have seen inside a home, a wedding chapel, a singles bar, a game show soundstage and two law offices.

At the risk of appearing narcissistic, it's regrettable there is no courtroom scene. This would have given the story arc more closure.

Musical director David O conducts a three-person orchestra composed of piano, cello and woodwinds that performs Kamler's music as if it had been part of the musical theatre songbook for decades. Sound design is by Cricket Myers and lighting design is by Jeremy Pivnick. Danny Cistone's set design, including the aforementioned law offices on wheels, is clever.

In a recent pre-opening interview on NPR's "All Things Considered," Kamler was asked how she was going to spend Valentine's Day. She replied that the show opened Valentine's Day night and that she would spend it at the opening with her boyfriend, Rick Culbertson, the show's producer. That night, which was also the press performance, Culbertson made a speech that culminated with a marriage proposal to Kamler. She said "yes" from her seat on the aisle. Given the long-term prospects for the successful life of this show, Kamler may need to interpolate a new musical number: "The Pre-nup Tango."

"Divorce! The Musical" continues at the Hudson Mainstage through March 29 but it is likely to have many extensions. Performances are Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights at 8 p.m. and Sunday matinees at 2 p.m. The Hudson is located at 6539 Santa Monica Blvd. Reservations can be made at 323-960-1056.

Alan H. Friedenthal is a Los Angeles Superior Court commissioner.

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