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Merrily We Roll Along



"How does it happen? When does it disappear? Where is the moment?" ask a troupe of dancing socialites reflecting on the life of one Franklin Shepard, a composer for musicals who traded his idealistic visions for practical success. Those "dreams that will explode" push the story back through Frank's life to ask in the title song "how can you get so far off the track?" and "why don't you turn around and go back?"

Time traveling is not yet possible, but the Actors Co-op and director Richard Israel's new production of Stephen Sondheim's underrated masterpiece "Merrily We Roll Along" takes us back in social and musical history to capture the moments of what it's like to grow up.

At a party held for producer and songwriter Frank Shepard (Brent Schindele), his old friend Mary Flynn (Leslie Spencer) gets drunk and announces to everyone how superficial Frank's so-called show-biz friends are. Frank's vicious wife, the Broadway singer Gussie Carnegie (Gina D'Acciario), causes a ruckus by attacking Frank's new lover and leading-lady Meg Kincaid (Rory Patterson). Thus begins the musical, which then warps backward in time in Frank's life to see how he has turned to this pointless life of big time movie-maker from the idealistic humble beginnings of collaboration with Charley Kringas (Matt Bauer). The worst vice in the world is "advice" according to Frank, so we simply follow him without getting overt commentary.

In the first big flashback, Bauer gives a spectacularly nerve-cringing performance in calling out Frank during a TV show. The pair was being interviewed about Frank's new movie deal, which Kringas had not heard of. Frank has become a busy money-maker to the detriment of the collaboration, no longer working on his music and taking forever with the little that he does. Kringas, who has since won a Pulitzer prize for his plays like "Darkness Before Dawn," lashes out at Frank on national TV. Bauer begins with that simple chord that Frank came up with, but goes into a satirical rant that drives the audience crazy (they are like Irving and Berlin, he says). His rendition of "mutter mutter mutter" to imitate Frank talking on the telephone turns the song "Franklin Shepard, Inc." into a singspiel, combining voice with music, and turning the reality of the TV show into a surreal experience and ending the friendship.

Another transition brings us to a Central Park West apartment, where Frank and Charley are arguing about doing a movie version of their musical "Musical Husbands." Charley really wanted to get their ambitious, artistically challenging, semi-avant-garde "Take A Left" done, but Frank is always worried about being successful. Mary, Charley, and Frank try to keep the disagreements under the cover, singing "Old Friends" about the three of them. Then comes one of the great songs in the play, which begins with Frank sitting down on the piano and repeating the phrase given earlier in "Franklin Shepard, Inc." He sings about growing up, throwing away idealism, and realizes, thanks to Gussie's interruption, that growing up is about knowing what you want. "Facing facts," sings Frank, "still with dreams, just reshaping them." We realize how his materialism has evolved, but instead of marching towards his ultimate meaningless, we go towards the times when dreams were still possible.

The scene moves to Frank's court divorce with his wife Beth (Selah Victor). Frank has been carrying on

an affair with the Broadway singer Gussie, who later decides to divorce her husband Joe Josephson (John O'Brien). The scene in which Frank's friends sing in unison but in each's individual voice telling him to take a vacation is a foreshadowing of more daring cacophony later on. That song, "Now You Know," seems to jump right into "It's A Hit," when the friends realize that their musical "Musical Husbands" is finally a success. Charley hilariously records the crowd noise to prove that they have a Gargantuan winner. As the musical moves towards more and more voices being active at the same time, we also understand each character better and better as if we're journeying towards the center of their being.

Soon, we move back to when Gussie introduces Frank and Charley to some influential friends like writers and critics known as "The Blob," who throw around random phrases like "Warhol, Kurosawa, Gestalt." Here, Frank ditches the "Take A Left" idea for "Musical Husbands," part of the growing up he refers to earlier. One of the strongest aspects about Israel's production is his ability to bring distinct elements together in a coherent way. In this scene, Charley sings "Good Thing Going," a song with the melody of "Growing Up" but adapted from their earlier collaboration. It's the most melodic work in the play, and during the second rendering, Israel has the Blob start interrupting the song. At first, we sense cacophony, but soon, the melodies blend like a good jazz improv, and audience is given a sniff of real live party atmosphere.

After another scene where the young friends pay at a Greenwich village club, we get to the heart of this musical. In two scenes, we find out how Frank meets his wife Beth and in the last, we realize why the three friends are together and how Frank and Charley gave themselves up to work on a musical together ("to change the world"). From a depressing ending is the realization of how this relationship started, which is a bitter-sweet end to an intriguing work, and as one character notes early in the work, "a compromise." Perhaps knowing how it starts happily, capturing that moment, is just as good as an happy ending, though at the end, we know Frank is lost.

"Merrily We Roll Along" is performed by the Actors Co-op (<http://www.actorsco-op.org>) at Crossley Terrace Theatre in Hollywood, California, until 24th of October, 2010.