

# Cotuit's Sondheim show a great deal

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COTUIT - Lyricist-composer Stephen Sondheim's songs are a treat for theatergoers because they are laced with sly, funny lines that match the music perfectly. Actors must master the intricacies to get each syllable on

## Theater REVIEW

the right note with superb diction while also bringing out the strong emotions in each song.

You can imagine how hard that can be on performers. Happily, director Mark LiCalsi and his ensemble of five singers and a nonsinging narrator at Cotuit Center for the Arts get the job done with wit and charm. "Side by Side by Sondheim," a two-act revue that includes 29 songs and a closing medley, is delightful because the performers not only sing but act; each song is a vignette that feels as if it was pulled directly from the show where it originated.

"You Gotta Have a Gimmick" from "Gypsy" is a great example. Performers Laura Garner, Lily Mae Harrington and Martha Paquin play chorus girls singing

about how to stand out in a burlesque show. Garner's trumpet and Paquin's scarves are funny, but Harrington brings down the house by using flashlights as tassels (those were worn on the bosom so the cops wouldn't raid the burlesque shows for violating decency laws).

Harrington appears to be a young performer who is equally comfortable with Sondheim's bawdy sensuality and devastating sadness. She has a powerhouse soprano voice with an impressive range and great breath control. Her renditions of "Can That Boy Foxtrot" (with Garner) and "Losing My Mind" show her acting range matches her vocal reach.

She and Paquin have a duet from "West Side Story" that sends chills up the spine. During the exchange "A Boy Like That/I Have a Love," you can feel the love and despair coming from Paquin as a mother and the passion as Harrington struggles with her love for her mother and her off-limits man. As she cries and sings at the upper end of her voice, one errant

note escapes and makes you realize how she is working without a net and letting herself disappear into the role. Brava!

Garner's campy performance of the little-performed "I Never Do Anything Twice" and Paquin's comedic turn in "Getting Married Today" are wonderful. It's hard to hear all the fast-paced lyrics but Paquin's comic acting is great.

The ladies' voices are, overall, stronger than the gentlemen's, but Glenn Wall and Kevin Quill are charming and hilarious. Quill doesn't feel old enough or cynical enough to be the weary bachelor Bob singing "Being Alive" in Sondheim's "Company." But he is wonderful accompanying himself on the piano on "Anyone Can Whistle," from the musical of the same title.

And you can't review this show without mentioning the musical prowess of pianists Elizabeth Beckel and Nancy Wendlandt. Their accompaniment is wonderful, and only once in 30 songs - on Garner's rendition of "I'm Still

## ON STAGE

**What:** "Side by Side by Sondheim"

**When:** 8 p.m. Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays, through Feb. 20

**Where:** Cotuit Center for the Arts, 4404 Falmouth Road (Route 28)

**Tickets:** \$20 general admission; \$18 seniors, \$15 members, \$10 students

**Reservations:** 508-428-0669

Here" - did the instruments overshadow the vocals.

Garner and Wall work particularly well as a middle-aged couple in marriage-themed songs, such as "We're Gonna Be Alright."

Narrator Todd Bidwell is

debonair, funny and warm - providing tidbits to set up the songs and bits on Sondheim history. It's easy to forget that Sondheim is American: His wit and bawdiness feel British. But he was born in New York and summered in Pennsylvania, where his neighbor was writer and theatrical producer Oscar Hammerstein II. Bidwell notes that Sondheim, at 15, brought a musical score to Hammerstein. It earned the teen an honest appraisal (terrible, but with talent) and a master class that very afternoon. The two later collaborated.

Vocally, the Cotuit production is not perfect, but it is terrific fun. And the cast's interaction - along with Greg Hamm's lighting design - creates a warm, welcoming vibe.

The ticket is \$20. Each song: 67 cents. Facial expressions and body language: priceless. You won't find a better bargain or a better way to spend two hours on a cold wintry night.