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Theater review: ‘Falsettos’ at Third Street Theatre

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One of the more thoughtful and well-crafted musicals of the last three decades, the seldom-seen “Falsettos” shows its staying power in Richard Israel’s superbly staged revival at the renovated Third Street Theatre.

Told entirely in song, this 1992 compilation of two one-acts by composer/lyricist William Finn explores the bittersweet relationships in a fractured family of neurotic New York Jews during the years flanking the onset of Reaganomics, yuppie greed and the AIDS outbreak. Some period-specific plot elements notwithstanding, the show captures still-resonant complexities of love, commitment and responsibility through the comic timing, dramatic heft and singing chops of a thoroughly professional cast.

Act I (originally the stand-alone “March of the Falsettos”) opens in 1979 as flawed protagonist Marvin (Jesse Einstein) sings of his desire to maintain “A Tight-Knit Family” despite having left his faithful wife Trina (Lani Shipman) for his new boyfriend Whizzer (Richard Hellstern). Marvin’s selfishness wreaks emotional havoc — both Shipman and Hellstern deliver hilariously painful showstopping numbers as the victims of Marvin’s fickle affections.

In the darker Act II (“Falsettoland”), set two years later, Marvin and Trina’s son, Jason (Major Curda, a budding talent with preternaturally seasoned stage instincts) reluctantly faces the life transition implicit in his approaching bar mitzvah, against the backdrop of his father and Whizzer’s radically altered domestic situation. Jason’s psychiatrist stepfather Mendel (Chip Phillips) relieves some of the tension with his satirical reassurance that “Everyone Hates His Parents” — but only underscores the reality that Jason is not the only one with some growing up to do.

A direct inheritor of the Stephen Sondheim-era transformation of the modern musical (longtime Sondheim collaborator James Lapine co-wrote the book and directed the original productions), “Falsettos” articulates its deep-seated romantic ambivalence — for gays and straights alike — with biting wit and sophisticated psychological insight.

Director Israel, his precision ensemble and Gregory Nabours’ live three-piece band hit the right dramatic and musical beats — the few compromises are budgetary — in this funny, sad and powerful caution that no matter how much we comfort ourselves with the soothing refrain that “Everything will be all right,” it’s only when tested with adversity that we discover the true depth of love.

-- Philip Brandes

"Falsettos," Third Street Theatre, 8115 W. 3rd Street, West Hollywood. 8 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays, 3 p.m. Sundays. Ends Oct. 30. \$28. (888) 718-4253 or www.thirdstreettheatre.org. Running time: 2 hours, 40 minutes.

Photo: Major Curda, from left, Richard Hellstern, Jesse Einstein, Lani Shipman and Chip Phillips. Credit: Yenka Honig.

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