

Stephen Sondheim has never been a favorite of mine but his attempt to explain how we arrive at certain events in our life with the musical "Merrily We Roll Along" does capture a certain amount of interest. The recent revival at Atwood under the direction of Brian I. Katz was a demonstration in both the triumphs and tragedies that go along with musical theater.

The story opens in 1976 at the home of the famous composer Franklin Shepard (Tom Guyette). A man disenchanted by both the success of his music and his second wife, Gussie (Alexandra Dobos-Czarnocha). A new work by the composer has been produced and a party is being held in his honor. During the course of the party it becomes known that Frank has lost interest in his wife and has become involved with a younger actress (Leea Thomases). A rift also is exposed

between Frank and his long time friend Mary Flynn (Leah S. Abrams).

It is this rift between Frank and Mary along with one that develops between Frank and his friend Charley Kringas (Mark Q. Bessel Vanderzee) that Stephen Sondheim and George Furth try to explore over the course of the musical. Using a series of flashbacks the audience is

"Merrily we muddle through"

transported back in time from the mid-seventies to the late fifties. Sondheim and Furth use this technique of flashbacks to chronicle the rise and fall of the three's careers along with the eventual coming apart of the three friends.

The unfortunate result is that in many parts of the play both the acting and the direction seem to lack the necessary energy to carry the show. At numerous points during the musical numbers the

singing seemed disjointed and almost sounded as if some members of the cast were singing different songs.

There were however occasional moments when the singing did come together. Scenes such as when Frank and Charlie introduce their music to the theater establishment allowed the audience to witness truly glorious theater as the singing was uncharacteristically both fluid and understandable.

Another problem arises

when it comes to the direction and choreography of the play, the musical numbers in particular. Brian I. Katz and Christine Thomas's attempts at spectacle were occasionally successful. Many times though the audience was able to look right through the spectacle and see the strained and sometimes unnecessary direction which was at the heart of the show. I found

the set uninspiring and at certain points painfully annoying to look at. Also the pit orchestra at times was able to distract attention away from the action taking place on stage, and the lights of the pit orchestra were especially distracting when the stage was supposed to be bathed in blackness. The lighting of the show also proved wanting at times as the top part of the stage

sometimes was too dark to distinguish the actors on top of the staircase who were singing. Not all of the direction should be seen as disgraceful. At times Mr. Katz was able to bring balance to the stage and occasionally his attempt at spectacle did pay off.

At many points the strength of the cast made up for the other weaknesses of the show. Mr. Guyette was able to fill the part of leading man with the skill it required. The part of

Beth Shepard played by Megan H. McNamara was done believably. Ms. Dobos-Czarnocha was more than able at pulling off the part of the aging Norma Desmond-like character of Gussie Carnegie. While Ms. Abrams' portrayal of Mary Flynn sometimes bordered on the comical, she nevertheless provided the audience with a strong performance she should be proud of. Mr. Vanderzee

sometimes lacked the energy which his part as the playwright Charley Kringas needed, but this was made up for by his talent at comic relief which his character equally needed.

I was pleased by the performance of Conor Hanover as Frank's attorney, although I don't remember Mr. Hanover's voice having that much bass. I was also pleased by the presence of Mr. Neil Schroeder in the cast. Mr. Schroeder brings to

"Merrily" the same grace and control he brings to every production he participates in.

This brings me to the performances of Tricia Yang as the television interviewer and John Macey as the theater producer Joe Josephson. Ms. Yang has shown her ability at stage presence. She has also demonstrated her ability to take control of the stage. It is next to impossible not to notice Ms. Yang on stage and just as impossible to walk away without remembering her

performance. Mr. Macey in his musical debut, although he did not have a solo singing number, was nothing short of spectacular. Mr. Macey brought to his character a charm and believability that was incredible. Ms. Yang and Mr. Macey are evidence of the refreshing new talent which has arisen in the Clark theater community and I look forward to seeing them in future productions.

"Merrily We Roll Along" was not the biggest flop in theater that I have seen. But it does contain many problems which burdened the audience to the point where I almost feel asleep during the first act. The second act though moved much more gracefully and saved the show from utter ruin. Occasionally the choreography did make sense, but at many times, like the singing numbers, it seemed like a series of actions without any meaning.

I don't think Mr. Katz lacks the talent to become a great director. But at the moment he seems to lack both the vision and the energy. Mr. Katz though is still developing as an artist and it will be interesting to see what he does with himself and his talent in the coming years. I also look forward to the upcoming productions of the assistant directors, Michael C. Dorrian and Alexandra G. Meitner, who have hopefully learned from this experience and will use it towards their own productions.