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Closer Than Ever

May 12, 2009 by [Leslie Weisman](#)

Filed under [Our Reviews](#)

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(l-r) Elizabeth Hester, Katie Nigsch and Elizabeth Parsons (Photo: Joseph M. Tessmer)

If you have a love for lyrics and verbal jousts and a passionate appreciation for the way they can, in the hands of a master, reveal things you think but never thought anyone knew you did, then run to Rockville before *Closer Than Ever* is not just farther than ever – but gone forever.

Closer Than Ever is the first theatrical child of a new company that is itself so young, it was but a gleam in producing director Jan Stewart's eye just a year ago.

The show, which won the Outer Critics Circle Award for Best Off-Broadway Musical in 1989, is Maltby and Shire at their very best.

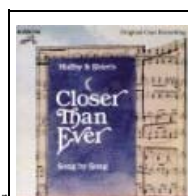
Which probably surprised them no end: *Closer Than Ever* is to an extent the musical theatre equivalent of one of those last-minute meals you make out of whatever's in the fridge, freezer and pantry

when guests arrive unannounced – and it turns out to be one of the best meals you ever made. (It's a fascinating tale, but too long to include here.)

At the Rockville Jewish Community Center, the set and lighting are minimal but creatively used; less is more. In this series of vignettes about couples, the lack of distracting visual frills allows the audience to focus full attention on its often straight-to-the-heart, right-in-the-gut insights about the human condition. Three gray stone steps stretched across the stage allow the actors, whose characters are Everyman and -woman (the program identifies them as Man 1, Man 2, Man 3, Woman 1, Woman 2, and Woman 3) to approach or recede from each other as if from the front stoops of their homes. The faux red brick walls add a nice, homey touch, while the lighting makes skillful use of a half-dozen white floor-to-ceiling shears, at times casting shadows on figures silhouetted behind them who comment on the goings-on center stage.

All of the accomplished cast members, many of whose faces will be familiar to DC theatre-goers, have their own unique "moment" where they can strut their stuff – and impressive stuff it is. (A small caveat would not be out of place regarding the singing, which ranged from excellent to acceptable, so that in the opening chorus "Doors," I was unsure whether the dissonance was intentional. Whether it was an off day for a cast member or two is unknown.

"She Loves Me Not" is hummably melodic, a song that could easily stand on its own – something the three characters who form its unlikely triangle cannot. Man 1 (John Dellaporta) regrets that he cannot love Woman 1 (Katie Nigsch) who in any case is otherwise occupied: she's after Man 3 (Michael Grew) who ignores her pleas: he's hot for the equally unattainable... Man 1. "My love is yours for the asking," they sing in imploring unison to the respective objects of their desire who remain deaf to their cries, focused as they are on their



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own blindly unresponsive loves.

As Man 1, Dellaporta evinces an achingly innocent sincerity as a clueless but half-crazed rejected lover on a rooftop in "What Am I Doin'," one of the many highlights of the show that gives his smooth, ringing tenor a chance to shine. On the other side of the rejection tango, Elizabeth A. Hester's (Woman 2) sassy, snippy, snarly southern drawl in "You Wanna Be My Friend?" slaps down the unsuspecting (and similarly clueless) Man 2 (David Kozisek), who has told her he wants to break up with her but – grit your teeth here, girlfriends – *still wants to be her friend*. By the time Hester's pitilessly perfect character is through with him, poor Man 2 feels like *number 2*. And even the men in the audience couldn't help but appreciate the skill with which she dispatched him.

But fear not! Man 2 will be redeemed (although it gets tricky here; while the actors are assigned character identities, there's no clear connection between Man 2 in one scene and Man 2 in another) in "One of the Good Guys," a quietly heart-wrenching account of a happily married man who acknowledges the happiness his marriage has brought him, yet cannot dispel a naggingly insistent feeling lurking somewhere beneath the surface. Kozisek is deeply moving; his Man 2 displays a mature and wistful acceptance tinged with an irrevocable sadness as he recalls the life, the women, the excitement he could have had – that insistent urge "to shoot for something higher" that defined his youth. In the end he concludes that "whatever choice you make," the longing for what might have been will forever haunt you.

In "Patterns," Nigsch's lovely, clear soprano and crystalline diction cut through the crazy-house kaleidoscope of commitments and responsibilities she sings about. From the tangible, visual patterns of household objects and office supplies to the spiritual and psychological patterns of belief and behavior, all will be ruefully familiar to women everywhere who juggle multiple roles and identities.

Nigsch also excels in "There," a sharply observant take on the man-woman paradigm from the woman's perspective, with Man 3 (Grew) trying his best to defend himself in a battle he fears he's already lost, but hasn't quite figured out why. And yet all is not as it seems; for while Woman 1 appears to hold all the cards, in the end they form a house of cards that collapses around husband and wife, with neither one the victor. You were always present, she tells him, "but you were never there." Yet her insistence, he protests, made him "want to be elsewhere"; by the time he realized what he was losing and wanted to be there for her, she was gone.

In a final twist that could be seen as a variation on Gertrude Stein's famous taunt turned into a warning and a lesson, there is now no more "there" there for them. Grew and Nigsch's eye and body language is so real and so true to character that you almost physically feel them being pulled apart, while part of them – memory of what they shared, and the tiniest of hopes that there IS still something there that can be saved – does not want it to end. But they know that it must. And it will.

This show does not, however, let you sit in the gloom for long. The next number is one of the funniest: The hilariously raunchy "Miss Byrd" has Woman 3, a sweetly sizzly, kitteny Elizabeth Parsons, as a lower-level secretary in bun and glasses whom nobody notices. The "invisible Miss Byrd" sneaks off each day for X-rated coffee breaks with her boyfriend, described and danced upon the desk by the suddenly sensual secretary in full stripper va-va-voom mode, then returns to her desk – "and doesn't say a word." But inside? "Miss Byrd is singing," she crows, embellishing her song with an impressive scat that will have you checking the theatre for Ella. "This bird is singing!" Parsons has all the moves as she caresses the desk lasciviously, her eyes ready to take on all comers, her voice slipping into something a little less comfortable – think Louis Armstrong on hormones. (That she looks more like Miles than Louis makes her transformation all the more remarkable.)

Another droll bit is Woman 1's take as the schoolteacher who explains to her class the ways we humans are different from animals ("The Bear, the Tiger, the Hamster, and the Mole"). Unfortunately, it is not to homo sapiens' advantage: Those clever beasties, she tells the girls with the sort of self-satisfied assurance that brooks no disagreement, have got it all figured out. The females use the males for reproduction, then lose them when the job is done. Thrusting her pointer with unseemly pleasure at the motley collection of fifties-era color slides illustrating various members of the animal kingdom, Nigsch becomes at once both the teacher we admired or feared and the co-worker who gets all the bonuses. "The animals are doing what humans only dream," she advises her students with a knowing glint in her eye. You could see the responding nods amid the ripples of laughter in the audience.

And then there are the "Three Friends" dressed in stylishly coordinated dresses who take great pride and satisfaction in the way they have supported each other over the years. Of course, as they begin to give examples of their unwavering commitment to sisterhood and to each other, one recalls a wee small something that happened to throw a major wrench into her sister's bliss. And so, reflecting as it comes to its snarling close, not the best but the worst of us, this erstwhile tribute to supportive sisters becomes a sniping diatribe against backstabbing bitches. But don't take it to heart, ladies. After all, things can, and will, get



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worse, as we learn in "The March of Time," where all six sing of the things in their lives they weren't ready for – "the cellulite, the jokes, being compared to my folks." *Ouch.*

Of course, there are also times when being compared to your folks puts not a crimp in your style, but a lump in your throat. So it is for "If I Sing," Man 3's (Grew) deeply moving tribute to his father marred only by what appeared to be vocal strain. The lyrics are gentle poetry, the melody a soaring cadence, as Man 3 contemplates the piano his father gave him when he was a child, and taught him how to play it – something he did not fully appreciate at the time. (Kudos, by the way, to Amy M. Gleason, whose playing throughout the show made a mini-orchestra out of a spinet.) "If I sing," he tells his unseen Dad, "you are the music. If I love, you taught me how." A lovely tribute to fathers on what was, as it happened, Mother's Day.

In a way, though, that was entirely appropriate. As men and women we have our differences, which sometimes split us irrevocably apart. But there are things that draw us together, things that are common to us as human beings, or that make us appreciate who we are, and who they are. That bring us, as Maltby and Shire would have it, despite all the craziness, closer than ever.

Closer Than Ever

lyrics by Richard Maltby, Jr., music by David Shire

directed by Jay D. Brock

musical direction by Ben Bernstein

reviewed by Leslie Weisman

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3 Comments on "Closer Than Ever"

■ [Heather newman](#) on Wed, 13th May 2009 9:52 am

A delightful evening — what a gem to discover such great talent and fun so close to home. The musical quality and acting talent is what you would expect on Broadway yet here it is waiting to be discovered in Rockville!

■ [Don Call](#) on Fri, 15th May 2009 8:10 am

A spectacular show and a great value. \$25 for adults and only \$15 for students and seniors. My daughter came home from the show and downloaded the music from iTunes so she could continue to enjoy the experience.

■ [Bonni Stewart](#) on Fri, 15th May 2009 10:56 am

Limelight Theatre's new show "Closer than Ever" was absolutely delightful! It made me laugh, it made me cry and more important.....it made me realize how simple life really is,..... although, at first glance, it appears to be so complex! After seeing this show, I felt uplifted and I felt "Closer than Ever" to my own feelings and thoughts.

The actors, whose beautiful voices and amazing articulation were outstanding.....definitely Broadway material!

I would recommend this production to anyone who would like to enjoy an absolutely wonderful evening filled with every emotion known to man!

Bonni Stewart

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