

# THEATER

## review

### **The Fantasticks**

by Joseph Sirota

This weekend, The Torrance Theatre Company concludes its brief run of *The Fantasticks*, the little romantic musical that holds the title "World's Longest Running Musical" (it's also among the most produced). In January 2002 it finally closed off-Broadway after logging over 41 years in New York's Greenwich Village, victimized in part by the dark shadows of 9/11 as the Sullivan Street Playhouse stands only blocks from ground zero. Multiple generations had enjoyed this little gem, many returning again and again over four decades.

The brainchild of two talented men, Harvey Schmidt (music) and Tom Jones (book and lyrics)—no, not British rocker Tom Jones—this ultra-popular show ironically opened to rather mixed reviews in 1960. The duo went on to write other hits like *110 In The Shade* and a parable of the circuitous path of love and marriage, *I Do! I Do*. *The Fantasticks* is based on a romantic coming of age play by Edmund Rostand, *Les Romaneques*, but it will likely register as a whimsical reverse twist on *Romeo and Juliet*. Here, two fathers fake a family feud and build a wall to separate their son and daughter in a clever ruse to inspire a feeling of "forbidden fruit" and to get their children to fall in love with one another.

It's an odd little fable sparked by lilting smart songs. The opening act focuses humorously on the innocent, idealistic sweetness of young love. In act two, the tale turns darker and more philosophical (though keeping its humor) while exploring the harsh realities of life and love's pains and disappointments—necessary to experience both love and life. Ultimately, *The Fantasticks* is a moral-based musical celebration of life and the walls we must build, and the falls we must take. Director Janet Miller conveys the fragile, wise and funny core and nuances that make *The Fantasticks* universal.

Eight well-cast fascinating characters illuminate the journey: a boy of twenty, comically yet sensitively played and sung by Barry O'Neil, a neighbor girl of sixteen, a convincingly "dreamy" and blossoming Erin Holt, whose acting captures our hearts, despite some "bent" notes in singing. Their fathers, played Craig Proctor and Dak Kinser, radiate comedic timing and pivotal theatrical presence. Michael Immel and Ed La Bay steal the show when onstage, flexing their comic muscles as unscrupulous but irresistible undercover con men. The ubiquitous narration assistant is ever-graceful Yvonne Same. Steve De Forest is notable as the mysteriously knowing and thoroughly seductive bandit, El Gallo, who also narrates. De Forest makes female hearts beat faster with his strong, touching vocals ("Try To Remember") and his shining presence. Finally, Corey Hirsch, as musical director and onstage piano accompanist, struts his Julliard and USC polished stripes as a winningly fitting one-man music provider.

The Torrance Theatre Company had to transport this gentle work to the middle of a borrowed office space (the modern Epon building), yet the simple, inventively-designed staging under stage manager Kate Barrett is remarkably up to the task of recreating the magic of an intimate theater space. One caution, it's a long, narrow seating area with comfortable seating, but without sound amplification or highly tiered stadium seating. So if your hearing is less than sharp, or if you're less than tall, arrive early and "run" for close up seats so you don't miss any of the enjoyable happenings.

*The Fantasticks* is onstage at Torrance's Theatre Company space at 20770 Madrona Ave., Torrance. Tonight through Sunday at 8 p.m., and Sunday at 2 p.m. Tickets, \$15. Call 781-7171. ER

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