

THEATER REVIEW

'She Loves Me': what a musical should be

By EVERETT EVANS
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Presenting a musical in streamlined concert format, with minimal staging and little in the way of production effects, provides a showcase for the work's writing and the cast interpreting it.

Bayou City Concert Musicals' rendition of *She Loves Me* succeeds on both fronts. True, there were a few rough edges, even a fumbled line (and prop) or two, during Wednesday night's opening at Ovation's.

Yet overall Joe Mastoroff's ingeniously crafted book. Jerry Bock's melodiously romantic music and Sheldon Harnick's witty and character-revealing lyrics are well-served by a talented and personable company; especially the four aptly cast leads.

As critic Laurie Winer noted of the show's hit 30th-anniversary revival in 1993, *She Loves Me* is "one of the dozen or so flawless book musicals in all of Broadway history."

Based on the classic film *The Shop Around the Corner*, *She Loves Me* chronicles one of the most confused relationships in stage history. Georg and Amalia, fellow clerks at Maracek's parfumerie in 1930s Budapest, cannot stand each other at work; their entire interaction a succession of squabbles, misunderstandings, and irritations.

Each has one great

consolation; a passionate romance-by-mail with an anonymous "dear friend" via lonely-hearts correspondence. Of course, Georg's "dear friend" is Amalia and vice versa — as the audience learns early in the proceedings. How the love-lorn hero and heroine find out — well, that is the ingenuity of *She Loves Me*.

As counterpoint, the show intertwines the more worldly affair of Kodaly, the shop's resident cad, and his current target, Ilona, who gradually decides she deserves something better.

She Loves Me is unusually detailed and believable in depicting the characters and their relationships (a rarity in musicals). The score rises to memorable peaks in unique numbers that distill the essence of the characters' emotions in each situational context

Longtime theatergoers will appreciate the veteran talents assembled by co-directors Paul Hope and David Thome, whose casting of leads more "mature" than the norm enhances the show's poignancy.

Chesley Santoro sings beautifully in the demanding role of Amalia (originated by Barbara Cook), exuding warmth and emotion in her big solos: the pensive *Will He Like Me?*, the gorgeous, heartbroken waltz *Dear Friend*, the conflicted then exultant *Ice Cream*. Santoro acts Amalia with the prickly

insecurity and need of a real person.

Kevin Cooney conveys the humor in Georg's confusion and exasperation, the wistful longing of his idealized romance. He puts across key numbers like the breathless *Tonight at Eight*, and the ebullient title song with an actor's resourcefulness, even if his voice sometimes is stretched a bit thin by the top notes.

Jenny Welch makes a perfect Ilona, tart and tender, experienced yet vulnerable. Her solos, the determined *I Resolve* and the delectable *A Trip to the Library*, could not be better realized (reason enough to attend).

Co-director Hope plays the vain, womanizing Kodaly — a smoothly unprincipled, yet roguishly engaging turn. He scores vocally with his silken pitch to *Ilona* and his ironic farewell *Grand Knowing You*.

Larry Dachslager contributes a rich characterization as mousy, pragmatic Sipos — memorably sharing his philosophy in *Perspective*.

Charles Krohn is crusty yet avuncular as Maracek. Jordan Craig brought a casual, callow air to ambitious delivery boy Arpad on opening night. (He alternates in the role with Aaron Mark.) Philip Lehl enlivens the Cafe Imperiale as the supercilious Headwaiter hopelessly and hilariously striving to maintain *A Romantic*

Atmosphere.

Hope and Thome have staged the show briskly (if a bit snugly) in Ovation's intimate space. The orchestra, led by Dan Rutzen, needed tightening at the start of Wednesday's performance but soon settled into a capable rendition. Like a couple of other opening-night rough spots, this likely will be remedied for subsequent performances.

Even in a modest pocket rendition, *She Loves Me* is everything a musical should be: funny, charming, touching, tuneful, intelligent, subtle. It is romantic without being mushy, sophisticated but never smug. Best of all (unlike many newer models), it is never crass, clunky, commercial, loud or obvious. How about making this the blueprint for new shows?

In the meantime, enjoy BCCM's heartfelt salute to one of the theater's most lovable musicals.