



Baby

(Freud Playhouse at UCLA; 562 seats; \$60 top)

By Bob Verini

A Reprise! Marvelous Musical Mondays presentation of a musical in two acts with music by David Shire, lyrics by Richard Maltby Jr. and book by Sybille Pearson. Directed by Kevin Chamberlin.

Arlene - Faith Prince
 Alan - Christopher McDonald
 Pam - Alice Ripley
 Nick - Graham Rowat
 Lizzie - Kerry Butler
 Danny - Daniel Tatar

A concert staging is the ideal showcase for tuners that deserve appreciation but are unlikely to merit a full pro revival. So it is with Richard Maltby and David Shire's 1983 paean to parenthood, "Baby," which was charming in its one-night-only Reprise! version. The evening introduced an enthralled audience to one of the (pun intended) unsung scores of recent years; in addition, the production was bursting with talent (Broadway soon-to-be's and already-are's) who could entertain while performing the telephone book -- a volume only slightly less interesting than Sybille Pearson's libretto.

"Baby" surveys three expecting couples over nine months, touching on a host of predictable topics in a mostly sunny and lightly satiric vein. Shire's pleasant and bouncy music finds extraordinary variety within the show's narrow emotional range, from opening number "We Start Today," that instantly characterizes each

marriage, to "Baby, Baby, Baby," that pays homage to the dads' celebration of both the expected little stranger and the red hot mama carrying it.

Second act awkwardly drags in conflict, an effort many composers would respond to with overwrought power ballads. But Shire contributes a set of delicate, heartbreaking melodies -- a husband's rueful acknowledgement that between wife and kids, the latter are "Easier to Love," or the three wives' recognition that major life turning points feel like "The End of Summer" -- that add more heft than the plot has otherwise earned.

Through it all, lyricist Maltby demonstrates his total mastery of complex but unself-conscious rhyming and the simple image that captures an emotional state. He is especially strong at the almost-lost art of effectively weaving minor characters into numbers along with the principals, as in the hilarious "Fatherhood Blues," or the Act Two opener in which a hugely pregnant teen (Kerry Butler) complains of the intrusive attention of other moms in "The Ladies Singing Their Song."

Broadway vet Kevin Chamberlin's staging was rudimentary but his casting could not have been improved. As unmarried undergrads with a sophomoric notion of commitment, the winning Butler and Daniel Tatar engaged in amusing vocal hijinks totally in keeping with her offbeat kookiness and his faux-punk-rocker sensibility.

Faith Prince and Christopher McDonald brought restraint and warmth to their unconvincing roles as fortysomethings whose impending fourth child creates a rift.

note we may not respond to every suggestion. Your assistance is appreciated.

Best of all were Alice Ripley and Graham Rowat, negotiating the fine line between maturity and self-pity when he turns out to be "shooting blanks," and carrying off with dignity and humor the now-tired wheeze of a couple's acrobatic efforts to conceive.

The monomania of the conversations about pregnancy and parenthood would be unrelieved but for the character comedy that is Pearson's forte. Michael Kostroff was delightfully deadpan as a fertility physician whose new contacts are interfering with his Rx, and the droll Alix Korey scored as a realtor dubious of a house's prospects ("I don't think we'll get away with 'Victorian charm'; we'd better go for 'handyman's special'").

All in all, this was one of those casts that makes one resolve to attend the next thing that every single one of them appears in. And any of them would be fortunate to have Georgia Stitt again wielding the baton, given her manifest ability to keep singers and accompaniment together through tricky rhymes and rhythm patterns in the face of limited rehearsal time.

Lighting, John E.D. Bass; sound, Philip G. Allen; music director, Georgia Stitt; stage manager, Lindsay Martens. Reviewed Feb. 5, 2007. Running time: 2 HOURS, 20 MIN.

With: Seth Belliston, Sue Goodman, Alix Korey, Michael Kostroff, Amy Ryder, John Sloman.

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