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Mmmmm...

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If parody is often a mark of affection, then “The Musical of Musicals (The Musical!),” now playing in an MPC Theatre Company production directed by Gary Bolen at the Bruce Ariss Wharf Theatre, in Monterey, is a ginormous love-bomb to the grand history of American musical theater. [Last year, PacRep presented “Forbidden Broadway.”](#) which shares with “MMM” an insider’s perspective about the popular musicals that continue to be the favorites of audiences. “Forbidden Broadway,” however, mocked the stars as much as the shows, whereas “MMM” trains its wicked, loving sights on the creators responsible for such classics as “Oklahoma,” “Cabaret” and “Evita,” refraining from lampooning the hardworking performers, famous or not, who at the end of the day have to pay the rent.

And paying the rent is what “MMM” is ostensibly all about. In five scenes, each devoted to a different musical-creating individual or pair, Eric Rockwell (music and book) and Joanne Bogart (lyrics and book) tell the story, more or less repeated five times, of thwarted lovers whose greatest dilemma is an inability to pay the rent. The works of Rodgers and Hammerstein, Stephen Sondheim, Jerry Herman, Andrew Lloyd Webber and Kander and Ebb are mined to an almost alarming degree, with references to multiple musicals whizzing by at breakneck speed, sometimes in a single line. “Follow your dream,” Mother Abby (Jennifer L. Newman) sings in “Corn,” the segment inspired by “Oklahoma,” her hands reverently clasped like the warbling old nun’s in “The Sound of Music.” “Don’t ask me why,” she wisely adds.

Indeed, with a show like “MMM,” it’s best not to worry about the plot or ask questions, and instead just let the echoes of familiar shows and characters wash amusingly across one’s mind. I especially enjoyed “A Little Complex,” the segment devoted to Sondheim musicals. Many

consider Sondheim's songs to be inordinately complicated, unmelodic and full of neuroses, to which I say, what's wrong with realism? Maria Comstock, as the young apartment-dweller struggling to pay the rent, pulls off the rapid patter of a song similar to "I'm Not Getting Married," from "Company," and Mitchell Davis, as the Sweeney Todd-like Jitter, nicely conveys the wild intensity of Sondheim's most inspired creation.

Because of a scheduling conflict, I watched the show during its preview performance instead of opening night, and while the cast was generally solid, there were a few songs offered in approximate pitches; I expect the production will tighten up throughout the run. Standout performers include John Daniel as Jütter, the emcee-like character from "Cabaret," whose sprechstimme-style singing is excellent and whose movements across the stage are convincingly creepy and assured. Less convincing in this segment ("Speakeasy," referencing "Chicago" and "Cabaret") was the show's one gay embrace, which struck me as needlessly timid.

[As I've written before](#), Camila De La Llata wonderfully channels the goofy charm of the young Carol Burnett; in "Aspects of Junita," as the Evita-inspired character, she carries off one of the show's funniest moments, which I won't describe here, except to say that you may remember a certain chandelier in "Phantom of the Opera"...

Jennifer L. Newman and Phyllis Davis both offer strong voices and smart comedic timing in their scenes; the remaining cast provides capable support for this fast-moving show, especially the fine-voiced Kristin Grillo.

The Wharf Theatre boasts [an interesting history](#); though the building has a somewhat crusty feel, which suits the Fisherman's Wharf atmosphere, its great advantage is the good acoustics, with not a bad seat in the house. The singers perform without electronic enhancement. What a joy to hear natural, unamplified voices! The able Michael Blackburn, on piano, accompanies the entire show. (But why no program bio for the pianist?)

At the performance I attended, the audience included several people who evidently knew as much about these musicals as the people who wrote them; the laughs were plentiful and frequent. Those less familiar with the ins and outs of Broadway shows may not catch every gag (such as the hurrying woman who cries out "Sorry!" then adds, "Grateful!" as she exits stage left) but the obvious enjoyment with which Bolen's talented company romps across the stage is contagious. It's the kind of show you leave humming a favorite tune, or perhaps two or three or more, and perhaps all of them at the same time.

"The Musical of Musicals (The Musical!)," plays at the Bruce Ariss Wharf Theatre through April 29. For tickets and information, call the MPC Box Office, 831-646-4213, or visit www.mpctheatreco.com.