
STAGE REVIEW

Funny-Bone Feminism

BY SYLVIE DRAKE

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"You Remind Me of a Friend," playing at the Circle Theater, is the first piece of its kind to come of age—to lay the medium on us rather than the message. It's one of the liveliest feminist musicals to hit Los Angeles in months. What message there is, all about growing up white and female in the suburbs, comes out as entertainment. At last.

You're given fair warning: if you want to be alright keep your teetees in your froufrou and don't let those hohos near your heehee. Self-preservation, says 6-year-old Shirley, is a matter of resisting all those natural impulses she can't resist—and making it.

Ambivalent? Of course. But so is life. Thus speaks Miss Temple (though you wouldn't have known it was that Shirley if the program didn't tell you).

Not that this musical by Robin Frederick (music and lyrics) and the husband and wife team of Sandra Matthews Deacon and Warren John Deacon (book—what book?) fails to take its philosophy seriously. It merely leaves out hostility. The stance is wry rather than satirical, amused instead of angry, and the result is glossy and slick, like the suburbs, but also incisive and funny. This is the sexual politics of commuter paradise, the feminine mys-

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Feminism With a Funny Bone

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tique demystified. When you can laugh at grievances without diminishing them, you're finally able to take a share of responsibility for the past state of affairs—and move on.

"Friend" is not a book musical so much as it is a revue—a compilation of songs you can hum in a minute laced with unrelenting skits, mostly humorous, that add up to a hugely entertaining evening. Frederick's music is extremely deft, equally at home in a lilting soft rock ("Live With It") or a tongue-in-cheek '50s takeoff ("Queen of the Prom") or exquisite ballads that take themselves and the issues more seriously ("This Isn't a Love Song," "Who Am I?").

The ensemble is one of the most congenial. Pat Angeli, Chris Bennett, Barbara Lynn Block, Jayne Hamil, Sandra Deacon and Frederick complement one another with such intimacy and ease that they seem related. Yet each makes a distinct contribution—Hamil with her Shirley Temple routines, Angeli in some recurrent Bette Davis impersonations, Bennett, Block and Deacon in a succession of mothers, daughters, girlfriends, wives and even a WASP fairy "otherwise known as the WASP fairy."

Between them they tackle such weighty matters as role muddling, the importance of clean underwear, mouse ham-mocks, statistics ("I have two and a half children, three and a half bathrooms and a husband who makes over 20 grand"), jet-setting ("Going nowhere fast"), unions and, of course, the teetees, fufous, heehees and hohos mentioned earlier.

If it all sounds oddly trivial, don't trust this reviewer, who is merely extending the game-playing from the stage to the page. The humor is not what you'd call probing (neither is suburban life), but it has its serious lining and it's to the credit of director Gordon Smith that it always dignifies the issues despite the fun that's had by all.

"You Remind Me of a Friend" was tried out about a year ago in Orange County under the title "Mirror, Mirror," so it's not entirely surprising that Robert W. Zentis' off-white set is the epitome of mirror chic. But it's the unity of concept and execution that impress here, as reflected in set, music, writing, performing, simple but smart choreography by Sayhber Sares, casual costuming by Marcia Frederick. Danny Ironstone's good musical arrangements and a terrific band consisting of Daniel Dryden, Bobby August, Michael Roberts and Ms. Frederick.

Rabid feminists may be angered by such a breezy treatment of peripherally feminist themes. But for the less fulminating rest of the world—especially the female rest—"You Remind Me of a Friend" should be a gentle affirmation of spirit. It reminds you, in fact, that growing up female and white in the suburbs isn't all bad. That it can be self-assertive even when it's boring, silly without aggres-

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SINGING IN SUBURBS--Life in commuterland is not so bland in "You Remind Me of a Friend."

Times photo by Bill Varie

sion, and that the important thing is recognizing the limitations—then fighting them off.

Performances at 800 N. El Centro run Thursdays through Sundays, 8 p.m., until May 7. (466-8803).