

LOS ANGELES

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By Les Spindle

Some artistic partnerships fit together as snugly as that proverbial love-and-marriage/horse-and-carriage comparison. Blank Theatre Artistic Director Daniel Henning has staged West Coast premieres of three edgy musicals from Obie-winning songwriter **Michael John LaChiusa**: *Hello Again*, *The First Lady Suite*, and last year's multiaward-winning *The Wild Party*. The Tony-nominated tunesmith visited L.A. each time to collaborate with Henning on tweaking these shows further, following their New York runs. Now these prodigious craftsmen have joined forces on a world premiere vehicle that falls somewhere between revue and chamber opera. They integrate songs from the rich LaChiusa canon into a bare-bones narrative, yielding a chic and exhilarating entertainment.

The endeavor bespeaks class at every turn — from the sparkling cast to the gorgeous production design to the sophisticated score. Sealing the deal is the electrifying staging of Henning, who finds more drama in one song than some directors elicit from an entire score. His conception brings a just-married couple (**Rick Cornette** and **Jennifer Malenke**) to the honeymoon suite of a posh hotel. The pair's first night together becomes a surrealistic journey into their innermost hopes and fears, illuminating the jumbled emotions of this life milestone. Other characters (**Vicki Lewis**, **Daren A. Herbert**, and **America Olivo**) flit in and out of the newlyweds' psyches, posing challenges such as infidelity, letting go of past loves, and trepidation about compatibility. Though some songs fit the framework more readily than others, the numbers are knockouts and lead to a satisfying conclusion.

LaChiusa's insightful lyrics and artful musical motifs — ranging from traditional Broadway to jazz to intricately patterned recitative — are brilliantly served by **Christy Crowl's** music direction. The performers parlay the bittersweet songs into a mélange of tour-de-force vignettes. The uproarious