

Los Angeles Times

Experiments in marriage, storytelling

By F. Kathleen Foley, David C. Nichols

October 06, 2006 in print edition E-20

Boldly innovative if a bit unstructured, "Hotel C'est l'Amour" at the Blank Theatre's 2nd Stage consists of more than two dozen songs from various musicals, including "The Wild Party" and "Hello Again." Director Daniel Henning, who conceived the show, has taken those unrelated numbers, all by multiple Tony nominee Michael John LaChiusa, and stitched them together with a semblance of a plot that revolves around a young couple's fractious marriage from first bliss to bitter disillusionment to renewed commitment.

The setting is a high-priced hotel room, evoked with striking Minimalism in Kurtis Bedford's Japanese-inspired set design. There, a newlywed Bride (Jennifer Malenke) and Groom (Rick Cornette) are spending their wedding night. The Groom is soon distracted from his white-clad, virginal spouse by the appearance of Marie (sultry America Olivo), a black-clad siren who may be a demon or a mistress from the Groom's past or simply the physical manifestation of the Groom's ambivalence about the married state.

The hotel's hosts, gamine Mimi (Vicki Lewis) and hunky Maman (Daren A. Herbert), are also periodically incorporated into the action. Bombastic Mimi is largely a comic relief character whose novelty songs are hilarious, although we might occasionally wonder what they're doing in this particular show. Far more brooding in nature, Maman soon turns the play's romantic triangle into a quadrangle, dallying with Marie under the jealous eye of the emotionally torn Groom

"Hotel" plays a bit like "I Do! I Do!" in limbo – but that's a good thing. Henning's faultless staging and LaChiusa's protean tunes buoy the action throughout, and though the plot occasionally splits its seams, the end result is both mysterious and formidably charming. Under the sound musical direction of **Christy Crowl**, the dulcet-voiced cast finesses this quirky theatrical experiment with sheer, shining professionalism.

– F. Kathleen Foley