

VARIETY

By TERRY MORGAN

Although "Hotel C'est l'Amour" at the Blank Theater Company is being called a world-premiere musical, it may be more accurately described as a revue of Michael John LaChiusa songs. Tunes range from a few new numbers to ones that weren't used in his older shows to some that have been slightly retooled for this production. Director Daniel Henning has put together a concept that loosely ties the material into a storyline -- a Bride (Jennifer Malenke) and Groom (Rick Cornette) spend their honeymoon night fighting off ghosts of the past and fears of the future -- but the concept doesn't really work. The songs remain separate entities, and the roles create only the vaguest intimations of character.

This production, however, is perfectly enjoyable as a revue, with some terrific songs and engaging perfs. Vicki Lewis, as hotel employee Mimi, is a knockout in each of her numbers, from the goofy joys of "Orangatang Marriage-on-the-Rocks" to the emotional ballad "Coffee." She's blessed with a strong voice, and she brings comic verve and focused energy to the show. Her delivery of the mock-Brechtian "Betty, the Clam Girl," a sublimely silly song, is the highlight of the evening.

Daren A. Herbert, who plays Mimi's co-worker Maman, also excels throughout, from a quietly moving rendition of "The Bed Was Not My Own" to a wildly charismatic take on "I Got a Little Time."

America Olivo is appropriately seductive, and occasionally sad, as temptress Marie, and she provides a nicely sardonic perf of "A Lovely Wedding," hovering over the Bride and Groom like a demon of impending divorce. She is darkly humorous in "True Love," opining: "There is no such thing as true love; you can kiss that crap goodbye."

Malenke offers a hilarious perf of the marriage-phobic "Someone Said," a song redolent of Sondheim and comparable in quality. She is very good throughout the show, but a few of her songs are less memorable, such as "Flotsam" or "John Paul."

Cornette, although he has a decent voice, largely comes off as bland, though his rendition of "Next to You" is vulnerable and affecting.

Henning's staging adds a visual spark to the majority of the songs, particularly in the wonderfully harmonized "Tree of Knowledge" and "True Love," wherein he uses the Bride and Groom as grinning dummies to superb effect.

The onstage band (Christy Crowl, Ray Frisby and Catherine Cavella) is outstanding and versatile. Kurtis Bedford's Japanese-accented hotel room set is uncomplicated yet serenely effective.