

## 'Closer' revue provides audience with real joy

[Judy Harrison](#)

Lovers of musical theater should hurry down to Northport Music Theater and soak up "Closer Than Ever," a musical revue about life and love and aging.

Not only is the show, directed by Scott R.C. Levy, the producing artistic director of the Penobscot Theatre Company, a joy and a blast of hopeful sunshine in what's turning out to be a soggy summer, the company needs and deserves the support of the state's theatergoing community.

In the midst of its second season, the company has been forced to cancel its last show, "Five Course Love," that was scheduled to run Aug. 27-Sept. 14 due to poor ticket sales. That is a shame, because owners John and Ruth Gelsinger are producing small-cast musicals that are delightfully intimate and musically complex but aren't well-known outside the small circle of people who have devoted their lives to the theater.

"Closer than Ever" is a perfect example of that subgenre. The revue premiered off-Broadway in 1989, ran for 312 performances and won the Outer Critics Circle Award. The music was written by David Shire and the lyrics by Richard Maltby Jr.

The two began collaborating in the late 1960s while students at Yale University. Their Broadway credits include "Baby" and "Big" and another musical revue "Starting Here, Starting Now" that was a hit in the late '70s. Shire has composed music for dozens of television shows and films, including "All the President's Men." In addition to his work as a songwriter, Maltby directed the Broadway musicals "Ain't Misbehavin'" and "Fosse."

"Closer Than Ever" features 23 songs sung, with a couple of exceptions, by two men and two women. Ruth Gelsinger plays the piano and Joshua King the bass for the vocally challenging revue. Dominick Varney, Kim Murphy, Annie Watson and Seth Grondin give depth and breadth to every number.

Under Levy's direction, each performer conveys all the humor, joy and bittersweet quality woven into each song that is, in essence, an individual story. Grondin's baritone is warm and velvety in "I'll Get Up Tomorrow Morning." Watson shines in "Back on Base," a bluesy duet with the bass player that shows off her versatility and sexy style.

That Varney's tenor mines the comedy in every instance is no surprise to Bangor-area theatergoers familiar with his work. The depth and irony he brings to "I'm One of the Good Guys," however, will be a delightful surprise for many. Murphy's soprano is a joy, especially in "The Bear, the Tiger, the Hamster and the Mole." Yet it is her years of experience at choral work that shows in the many songs she performs with others. Her greatest skill is understanding how to blend her voice perfectly with others.

Northport Music opened last summer and presented three small-cast musicals: "Six Women With Brain Death or Inquiring Minds Want to Know" "Golf: The Musical" and "The Musical of Musicals — The Musical!" This year, it opened with "Fame Takes a Holiday" and will close early with "Closer Than Ever."

Ruth Gelsinger said last week that ticket sales last year averaged 33 percent of the 128-seat house. This season, that percentage fell to 28. She said that she will spend the winter rethinking the plan to appeal to tourists visiting the area and may adjust the season to appeal to local theater lovers instead.

The Gelsingers' dream deserves to be supported. They are bringing together the best voices from Greater Bangor and Midcoast for productions no other companies in the state are producing. "Closer Than Ever" is a perfect example of that vision.

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