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# 'Closer Than Ever' hits mark

By Michael Grossberg  
Dispatch Theater Critic

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*Closer Than Ever*, which opened last night, is a fine finale to Otterbein Summer Theatre's season.

Intelligent, always pleasant and often wise, this deft musical revue explores territory from young adulthood to late middle age: liberated marriages, sensible divorces, first and second loves, parents, children, friends who move apart but stick together and yuppie couples who argue over who has the baby today.

Mandy Fox, Josh Gildrie, Katherine Smart and Ben Sprunger tackle a variety of coming-of-age themes and nameless characters on Donna Williamson's curving cakewalk set.

This off-Broadway hit, by lyricist Richard Maltby Jr. (*Baby, Miss Saigon*) and composer David Shire (*Baby*), is not recommended for pre-teens because of adult themes.

Maltby's lyrics brim with a hard-won maturity about coping, hoping, wishing, wooing, winning, losing, loving and living.

Perhaps the best song is *Fathers of Fathers*, which helps bring a wistful revue to a powerful emotional conclusion with its tender tripartite exploration of an archety-

## THEATER REVIEW

*Closer Than Ever*, Otterbein Summer Theatre's student production of Richard Maltby Jr. and David Shire's musical revue. Directed by Doreen Dunn.

Woman #1.....Mandy Fox  
Woman #2.....Katherine Smart  
Man #1.....Josh Gildrie  
Man #2.....Ben Sprunger  
Pianist.....David DeVenney  
**Well-Dunn, Smart and Foxy**

**Being presented at 8 tonight through Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday — through July 30 — in the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St., Westerville.**

**Tickets cost \$9.50-\$12.50. Call 823-1109.**

pal role. Pianist David DeVenney, Sprunger and Gildrie sing it with heartfelt masculine conviction.

The company has fun with the novelty numbers (*There's Nothing Like It*) and blends voices nicely in *Doors*, *Next Time* and *The March of Time*. Another *Wedding Song*, a delicate duet between Smart and Gildrie, is truly beautiful.

But the revue's most memora-

ble moments, lit cabaret-style by D. Glen Vanderbilt, are highly individual: Sprunger's infatuated *What Am I Doin'*, DeVenney's plaintive *If I Sing*, Smart and Fox's great solos.

Smart, a feisty stand-out in the title role of Otterbein's recent *Sweet Charity*, belts out *You Wanna Be My Friend* (opposite Gildrie's well-intentioned "friend") with a long-solitary woman's impatient anger.

Fox, a guest artist who helped Otterbein's recent *Jake's Women* sparkle, gives *Patterns* a distinctive personality, shape and spin.

Doreen Dunn choreographs and directs with understated sophistication and witty nuance. She stages many songs as mini-dramas (Fox's textured *Life Story*) or farces (Fox and Gildrie's frenetic *Fandango*).

DeVenney's rippling piano keys and bass player Eric Van Wagner's plangent chords resonate, but more musicians might have helped. The score deserves more orchestration.

DeVenney, director of Otterbein's Chorale and Early Music Ensemble, is giving his last performance before leaving for a new position at the University of Arizona. Those who have enjoyed his many opera and musical productions shouldn't miss this farewell show.



# Closer Than Ever

Five-minute lives

**Y**ou say the heat has melted your attention span? How about two-dozen short stories in two hours? That's what lyricist Richard Maltby Jr. and composer David Shire's *Closer Than Ever* amounts to. Conceived by Steven Scott Smith, this revue opened in New York in November 1989 and won the Outer Critics' Circle Award for best off-Broadway musical in 1990. Otterbein College presents it as the final offering in their Summer Theatre season.

No vignette—and no character's life span—lasts more than five minutes, so the performances rely at least as much on the immediate establishment of personality as on the quality of voice.

In both respects, Katherine Smart has the soul of a musical comedian. When she rains disdain on the hapless Josh Gildrie in "You Wanna Be My Friend," you feel that she sings for all women sick

of noncommittal men. When she joins the seals dancing in the skin of "Miss Byrd," she not only convinces you that she's just enjoyed an afternoon tryst, she'll probably induce a few giggles the next time a co-worker skips lunch. Deadpan bassist Eric M. Van Wagner plays the object of Smart's slinky attentions in the pun-filled "Back on Base."

Otterbein graduate and guest artist Mandy Fox gives heartfelt voice to a mid-life crisis in "Life Story." Chronicling her "liberated marriage" and her "sensible divorce," Fox builds a strong case against society's disposal of women of a certain age. In spite of her refrain, "I'm not complaining," you know she's properly pissed at the lack of appreciation shown by the youngsters who blithely benefit from the battles fought and won when she was their age.

Ben P. Sprunger touchingly laments his inability to have it all in "One of the

Good Guys," an intriguingly narcissistic ode to faithfulness and its price. Smart and Gildrie blend wonderfully in the sardonic "Another Wedding Song."

Doreen Dunn's modest choreography and strong direction make the most of Maltby's best miniature character sketches. Not every piece works, but there are enough serious social commentaries, clever turns of phrase, and unexpected details for the main quartet of performers to shine on.

Composer Shire gives musical director, pianist, and occasional singer David DeVenney much less to work with, if only because Maltby's personalities overpower the generally bland tunes. So it's especially ironic that one of the best ensemble songs is "The Sound of Muzak." You might think that Maltby and Shire penning a mocking history of the growing ubiquity of mediocre music would be akin to Stephen King ridiculing popular taste in fiction. Instead, the composer and lyricist create a witty and knowing bit of self-mockery. It's just one of the reasons that *Closer Than Ever* is such a pleasant close to the Otterbein summer season.

— Jay Weitz

*Otterbein Summer Theatre's Closer than Ever runs July 27-29, Thursday-Saturday, at 8 p.m., and Sunday, July 30, at 2 p.m. Call 823-1109.*