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REVIEW: Regressive musical "Merrily" scores on just about every level

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In "Merrily We Roll Along," the progress toward a cheerful ending is regress, backwards through time. Stephen Sondheim's musical, based on the earlier Kaufman-Hart play of the same name and premise, starts at the unsettled adult lives of friends — with assorted connections and hangers-on — and rolls merrily back to early times, when they looked up at the stars and saw themselves.

So is it really a happy ending if you know the present (in the show, 1976) is kinda crappy, compared with the sky's-the-limit, blood-pounding thrill of being young, talented and free in 1957?

For a backwards reunification, perhaps melancholy is the most honest reaction. If there is hope, it's in revisiting your past to uncover critical moments where choices paved life's courses.

Santayana wrote: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Sondheim wrote: "That's what everyone does: Blames the way it is/on the way it was/on the way it never was," and "I keep thinking, 'When does it end?/Where's the day I'll have started forgetting?'"

None of the cast of UA's "Merrily" has yet scaled Sondheim-like success ladders, nor reached an age to sag under the weight of regret, the chains of forged mistakes, the immutability ironically wrought by course corrections, so the earliest moments feel thinnest. Director Matt Davis has an eager, charismatic and talented group to work with, though, so it's easy to overlook, especially layered atop Kaufman/Hart and Sondheim/George Furth (book)'s lazy sketches of a Hollywood sellout: casual drugs, swimming pools — the decadence of a pool! — and buxom bikini-ed babes. The complex present is frankly the least connected of moments in "Merrily"'s moments.

Sondheim's stand-in — more than a touch of autobiography here — is Frank Shepard (Jacob Valleroy), a brilliant composer who's abandoned both Broadway and old friends Mary Flynn (Kiley Gipson), a writer and critic, and Charley Kringas (Daniel Hulsizer), Frank's old lyricist. Valleroy's openness and warmth create a terrific Frank. Beyond his much-lauded talent — displayed briskly as Broadway-style musical melodies — it's Frank's energy, his verve that draw followers, and Valleroy



Staff photo | Erin Nelson

Members of the University of Alabama Theatre and Dance department run through the opening scene in Sondheim's musical "Merrily We Roll Along" at the Allen Bales Theatre in Tuscaloosa, Ala. on Tuesday Nov. 4, 2014.

captures that with an ease belying the actor's youth.

Part of the reason the opening isn't as bitter as Sondheim intended is that Gipson is so very fine at delivering smart-drunken-witty lines, with the kind of timing and snap recalling an old-school broad. It's not a detraction, at all, an attraction, in fact, that makes you ponder all the more why Frank never fell for Mary — they're friends; she wants more — throughout their years. But the mysteries of why people don't get together are as much a part of theater as why and when they do.

The show gets a rocket boost from Hulsizer, who appears relatively late (earlier in the chronology), as the blustering, awkward, genuine and talented, yet not-so-confident-as-Frank partner. If Sondheim had seen Hulsizer and Gipson's timing, he'd have written a sequel for Mary and Charley.

All three mains click, especially on numbers such as "Opening Doors," which Sondheim has said is his most autobiographical song. It's kids striving to make it, working odd jobs, pounding the pavement, throwing up fliers for a cabaret show: "We haven't a thing to fear/we haven't got time!" For Sondheim, the dark twist arrives via a producer's: "There's not a tune you can hum/There's not a tune you go bum-bum-bum-di-dum..../I'll let you know when Stravinsky has a hit/Give me some melody!"

That's Chris Bellinger, strong and punchy as Joe Josephson, who has his own downward arc, starting (near show's end) as a big-money, big-power guy, married to an actor who's soon the hottest thing on Broadway, Gussie Carnegie (Brittany Steelhammer). Glimpsing the program in a darkened theater, I read that as "carnage," fully appropriate given the way Steelhammer (another role-appropriate name) tears up the stage, seductive and menacing.

This department's depth is like the *Crimson Tide*'s: If one star's not out front, another steps up. In the "Merrily" ensemble are actors who've been leads in other shows, and others who no doubt will be in the future. Davis makes best use of this cornucopia, spreading the love and lovely moments around. As you'd expect, the voices are glorious, happily understated in the smallish Allen Bales, though there was a bit of rough sound mix in the opening number. Physically it rollicks, with a nimble, clever set by Liz Whalen, clean and funny choreography by Stacy Alley, and whimsical, but not overpowering, costumes through the decades by Emily Haggerty.

Sondheim's challenging at best, concerned more with honesty than hum-ability, dealing with darker aspects of humanity than who-do-ya-love. Davis' production scores on just about every level, and performs the difficult alchemy of making the melancholic cathartic, rather than merely blue.

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