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TICKETHOLDERS
by Travis Michael Holder

Aspects of Love
Musical Theatre Guild

I beg to differ with everyone else in the civilized world: The astonishingly romantic music of Andrew Lloyd Webber's nearly forgotten, grossly overlooked, continuously and repeatedly demeaned chamber opera *Aspects of Love* is to me his finest effort in his long and fruitful career—and there isn't one dancing feline, roller-skating rollerboy, singing saviors or Norma Desmonds, nor even one crashing chandelier in sight. Instead, there are just beautiful, delicate songs in *Aspects* guaranteed to sweep you away with them and an actual storyline where the characters have fascinating individual tales to tell and lessons to learn.

First germinated while Lord Andrew was still at university obsessed with the lifestyle of Duncan Grant, Vanessa Bell and all those other magnificently freethinking Bloomsburys, then trotted out and developed with lyricist/bookwriters Charles Hart and Don Black after all the composer's infamous other works had become international cashcows, *Aspects* is not only the guy's best score, it's the one that makes me continuously pissed off at the guy about selling his soul to the devil of commercialism simply to secure the enduring success of his other works. If this man could write such incredibly gossamer, startlingly unadorned and haunting music as he did for *Aspects of Love*, he should be downright ashamed for the other profitably gaudy works he dumped on the public.

The most frustrating thing about Music Theatre Guild is that their concert-format productions, featuring actors mostly well offbook carrying scripts anyway so Equity will give them the sanction to *do their thing*, have runs about as long as those on Zelda Rubinstein's stockings. Begun a decade ago by an intrepid group of musical theatre professionals more as a workshop and way of keeping the ol' instrument in tune than as a full-scale producing entity, MTG offers some of the best veteran musical theatre talent on the west coast performing some of the world's most obscure musicals—and it's a treasured gift to Los Angeles for which we should all be deeply grateful. Of course, the format also has its Achilles' heel, with only one long rigorous weekend to rehearse, stage and ready their barebones productions for the few in attendance lucky enough to see their work unfold.

Under the laudable leadership of director Calvin Remsberg, this mounting of *Aspects* features some memorable moments on the Alex Theatre stage, particularly the performance of Kim Huber, taking a Monday night break from *The Marvelous Wonderettes* to play Rose, the musical's demanding leading role. Huber is, simply, magnificent in one of the most difficult dramatic roles in musical theatre. There are also exceptional turns by Christina Saffran Ashford as Guilietta, the free-loving mistress of almost everyone onstage, and Beth Alison as the spirited daughter who eventually teaches her anything-goes parents that even they can suffer such human foibles as jealousy and narrow-mindedness.

The men cast in MTG's *Aspects* all need more time to develop their complex characters than that infamous long weekend provides, however, although Michael G. Hawkins as George and Roger Befeler as Alex both offer striking vocal performances. Likewise, musical director John Glaudini would have been wise to allow himself a tad more rehearsal time at the Steinway to play the intricate score with less fumbling, and the gifted ensemble could have collectively used a little more drill to choreograph the moving around of the minimal set pieces just to keep from

developing traffic jams. From the suitably respectful ranks there are definitely performances to note, however, particularly *Paradise Lost's* dynamic Dan Callaway as Rose's boytoy Hugo and Jeffrey Christopher Todd in the variety of small roles he assays seamlessly.

But oh, *Aspects*. It took about three notes into Befeler's gorgeous rendition of "Love Changes Everything" to bring the tears to my eyes and the "Seeing is Believing" duet between he and Huber (his real-life wife) was nothing short of magnificent. This is a loving, gloriously respectful mounting of Lord Andrew's quiet little chamber opera which, to me, is his *Little Night Music*: simple, lyrical, and offering an arrestingly un-musical theatre-esque look into how characters can be developed and explored within the genre without necessarily resorting to grandstanding Merman-sized bravado. Not only that, why, *Aspects of Love* accomplishes all this without any of the traditionally Webber-y gimmicks, loud orchestrations or hydraulically-controlled special effects to guarantee ticket sales. That alone is well worth the price of admission.

Aspects of Love plays only once again at the Thousand Oaks Civic Arts Plaza, 2100 Thousand Oaks Blvd, Thousand Oaks on Feb. 17; for tickets, call 805.583.8700. For information on future productions coming up from the prolific Musical Theatre Guild, check out www.musicaltheatreguild.com.

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TRAVIS MICHAEL HOLDER has been writing about LA theatre since 1987 and for *Entertainment Today* since 1990. As an actor, he received the Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle Best Actor Award as Kenneth Halliwell in the west coast premiere of *Nasty Little Secrets* at Theatre/Theater. He has also been honored with a Drama-Logue Award as Lennie in *Of Mice and Men* at the Egyptian Arena, four Maddy Awards, a ReviewPlays.com Award, both NAACP and GLAAD Award nominations, and five nominations from *LA Weekly*. Regionally, he won the Inland Theatre League Award as Ken Talley in *Fifth of July*, three awards for his direction and performance as Dr. Dysart in *Equus*, was up for Washington, DC's Helen Hayes honors as Oscar Wilde in the world premiere of *Oscar & Speranza*, toured as Amos "Mr. Cellophane" Hart in *Chicago*, and traveled twice to New Orleans for the annual Tennessee Williams Literary Festival, opening the fest playing Williams himself in *Lament for the Moths* in 2003 and performing in *An Ode to Tennessee* last spring. Never one to suffer from typecasting, Travis' most recent LA performances have been as Giuseppe "The Florist" Givola in Brecht's *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* for Classical Theatre Lab, Ftateeta in Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra* at the Lillian, Cheswick in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* at the Rubicon in Ventura, Shelly Levene in *Glengarry Glen Ross* at the Egyptian Arena, and the Witch of Capri in Tennessee Williams' obscure *Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* at the Fountain. As a writer, he's also a regular contributor to *Back Stage West* and *Salon City Magazine*, and five of his plays have been produced in LA. His first, *Surprise Surprise*, for which he wrote the screenplay with director Jerry Turner, is on the international festival circuit as a feature film with Travis playing opposite John Brotherton, Luke Eberl, Deborah Shelton and Mary Jo Catlett. His first novel, *Waiting for Walk*, was completed in 2005, put in a desk drawer, and the ever-slothful, ever-deluded, ever-entitled Travis can't figure out why no one has magically found it yet, taken it out and published the goddam thing. www.travismichaelholder.com