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THEATER REVIEW

By David C. Nichols, Special to The Times

Yesterday is never done in "Merrily We Roll Along," which Musical Theatre Guild presented Monday at the Alex Theatre in Glendale. Stephen Sondheim and George Furth's 1981 study of friendship may not wholly satisfy, but Todd Nielsen's concert staging bends over backward to make it play.

Based on the 1934 curiosity by Kaufman and Hart, "Merrily" was a flop in its Broadway premiere, though subsequent revisions have found more success. Its narrative begins at story's end and travels in reverse to its outset. This is problematic less for confusion than for character. We first meet composer-turned-producer Franklin Shepard (the excellent Robert Townsend) at his professional zenith and personal nadir. Furth's functional book reveals how he got there with efficient logic but scant insight into persona. It is to the strong-voiced Townsend's credit that this antihero registers at all.

Fellow principals Mary Flynn (Lisa Picotte) and Charley Kringas (Richard Israel) revolve around Frank, for reasons that emerge as "Merrily" rolls along to its affecting, Sputnik-viewing finale, "Our Time." Picotte and Israel played these roles in the 2000 West Coast Ensemble revival, and they have deepened considerably. Although Picotte's emotional fervor sometimes distorts the musical line, she makes a touching Mary, and Israel turns Charley's televised nervous breakdown, "Franklin Shepard, Inc.," into a tour de force.

Cynthia Ferrer, acerbic and full-throated, swipes every scene as conniving Gussie, the key to Frank's spiritual downfall. As the spouses they betray, Maura Knowles and James Gleason have fewer opportunities, but both are capable. Director-choreographer Nielsen, who smartly stages the piece around an ambulatory piano, gets sharp cameos from his ensemble, notably Mary Van Arsdel and Roy Leake Jr. as dubious in-laws, Tracy Lore's talk show host and Trevor James Berger's relaxed Frank Jr.

Sondheim's score remains marvelous in its ingenuity and melodic appeal. If "Merrily" were inverted, the steadily simplifying themes and variations would develop in traditional manner, but that is immaterial to appreciating theater music this rich. There is a reason why Frank Sinatra recorded "Good Thing Going," or why countless benefits end with "Old Friends," and "Not a Day Goes By" will never die.

On Monday, the cast and musical director G. Scott Lacy's combo took this work past a couple of near-train wrecks and various uncooperative mikes. Given limited rehearsal, these gaffes were forgivable. "Merrily" repeats in Thousand Oaks and Long Beach, and the faithful may find it worth attending.