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## Trio is 'merrily' revisiting roles

Producers hope that this cast's experience with the production brings success.

By Joyce Rudolph

Musical Theatre Guild producers are banking on a huge success with their first production of the year because of the rich experience the lead actors bring to their roles.

"Merrily We Roll Along" will kick off the season Monday at the Alex Theatre. It is the first of five offerings from the company, which presents little-known Broadway musicals in a staged reading format, scripts in hand.

Tickets are selling steadily, said Kevin McMahon, a member of the guild's board of directors.

"I think it's going to be enormously successful," McMahon said. "[Stephen] Sondheim tends to bring out the fans. I will go anywhere to see a Sondheim show."

The story is about three friends, Mary, Frank and Charley, who make their way into show business.

Lisa Picotte, who plays Mary, was nominated for an L.A. Weekly Award for her performance in the same role when West Coast Ensemble produced it in 2000 in Hollywood, McMahon said.

"She's a fantastic actress," he said.

"She's had the role under her belt. She will be able to soar with it."

Adding another element of experience to the show will be Robert J. Townsend, who plays Frank, McMahon said.

"He has the most beautiful baritone voice, and he's a handsome guy," he said. "I believe he's going to become the next leading man in Los Angeles theater."

Playing Charley is Richard Israel, who assumed the same role in the 2000 West Coast Ensemble performance alongside Picotte, McMahon said.

"He's perfectly cast in this part," he said.

It's the third time he will play the role, Israel said, adding that he finds his portrayal of the character has changed as he has grown through the experiences in his own life.

"As a person's life changes over the years, you approach things differently," he said.

"It's not necessarily a conscious choice. Your life experience is different and the mileage you have is different, and it colors how you interpret a role."

Charley is smart and funny, and he stays true to his ideas throughout the course of the story, Israel said.

"He is someone I would like to emulate," he said. "He is a character who never compromises, and I'd like to be that way."

An unusual aspect of the play is that the story moves backward.

The characters open the play as jaded actors in their 30s and the story winds back to when they were starting out in their 20s filled with hope and optimism about their careers, McMahon said.

When it opened in 1981 on Broadway, it only played for two weeks.

"It was a disaster commercially," he said. "Producers lost a lot of money on it."

There are a lot of theories on why the play failed, McMahon added. The actors cast were in their 20s and reviewers said it was hard to see them playing aging actors.

But the production gained success when it came to Los Angeles in 1983, he said. McMahon was in that production, his first professional show right out of college.

It was an enormous hit, running for nine months, he said.

They cast people in their 30s, so it wasn't such a stretch for the actors to go from playing the characters from older to younger, he said.

The intimate setting in Los Angeles might have been better for the production, he added.

"It was in a small location, the Dupree Dance Studio," he said.

"It wasn't even a theater. It was just a studio back in the days when we had 99-seat waiver."

But Israel disagreed that theater size was a factor, saying it was inexperienced actors and other factors that contributed to the Broadway failure.

The nature of the concert reading at the Alex will make for a much better experience, Israel said.

"It's a whole different approach to the production, even though its in a large theater," he said.

"The audience is not seeing a huge, over-blown production. There is no set and there are minimal costumes. Getting to see this material is probably the purist interpretation of the material that you would ever see."