



## Promise With Potential

When I kiss you and your mouth is open, I am happy, even without the wine." The quote is from an inscription in Egypt. I don't know the dynasty, but it's thousands of years old in any case. It seems if love was not the absolute primordial poetic inspiration, it was surely near the top of the list.

Recently, Junebug Productions decided to wander from its more rigorous social concerns and spend some time in meditation on this intimate, personal phenomenon. Not that social concerns were dropped completely, for love was examined from the perspective of three distinct American subcultures: Appalachian, Puerto Rican and African-American.

The show, *Promise of a Love Song*, which premiered at the Contemporary Arts Center, was the result of a long-standing collaboration with two other companies: Teatro Pregones from New York and Roadside Theater from Kentucky. A member of each company scripted a segment, and director Steven Kent wove the separate stories into a free-form presentation, enlivened by the music of a swinging four-piece band that featured saxophone star Donald Harrison Jr.

Visually, the piece was sparse, but effective: The stage at the Freeport-MacMoran Theater was stripped bare of all accouterments, including the back curtain — exposing the old warehouse wall, with its boarded-up window and general feel of urban squalor. Three panels made of scrim defined the three

playing areas. The props were few and simple: a basket, a valise, a roll of red ribbon.

After an ensemble interlude, based on the music associated with each of the three cultures, attention shifted to Appalachia.

A country woman (Kim Neal Cole) began relating her life story and, in particular, her lifelong struggle to keep her retarded son, Billy, out of trouble. Billy (played by Ron Short, who also wrote the script and music for this segment) is the only one of her eight children who remained at home. His mental problem first manifested itself in fits of over-intensity, especially when playing his banjo. Gradually, it became clear — he was — to use the mountain lingo — "a dummy."

In monologues, sprinkled with words like "young 'uns," and "this'n" and "that'n," the woman tells of Billy's doomed, and at times mischievous, attempts to deal with the world

— in particular, his disastrous and humiliating search for sexual love. It is the mother's love, however, that is the focus of the piece. In spite of all the problems that her damaged son has caused her, he has enriched her life simply by being there and "giving her someone to care for." Both actors played with naturalness and conviction.



PROMISE OF A LOVE SONG DOESN'T QUITE MAKE GOOD, BUT DOES PROVIDE SOME INTRIGUING FACETS WHILE EXPLORING THE MANY DIMENSIONS OF RELATIONSHIPS.

In the Puerto Rican segment (written by Rosalba Rolon), a brother and sister (Desmar Guevera and Jorge Merced) tell of arriving in America and of life in their neighborhood, soon to become a "barrio." There are some wonderful descriptive touches, like brightly colored, plastic-covered sofas and linoleum covered with dime-size indentations from stiletto heels. But the love theme (centered on the upward-striving father and his American dream) gets somewhat lost amid a generalized lament for "the travails of immigration."

The African-American segment (written by John O'Neal) gets off to an unexpected and beguiling start, as an African-American student named Donna LaFleur (Adella Gautier) chronicles her Parisian adventures in the company of James Baldwin and the "Afroliterati." LaFleur returns to the United States, gets a law degree from Yale, and is appointed by the NAACP to represent Nelson Hardi-

man (John O'Neal), a fiery, militant orator who was "dragged from his bed in the middle of the night and locked in Angola with no charges." Donna and Nelson fall lyrically in love at first sight (the title of the play is lifted from a love poem woven through this segment), and conflict arises when Nelson must choose between his commitment to the

movement and the welfare of his family. A rough ride in this respect is prefigured when Donna announces she is pregnant, and Nelson joyfully proclaims, "We gonna make a new soldier for the revolution!"

Intriguing facets to this relationship are hinted at, like the difference in social class between husband and wife and the resentments Donna and her son feel toward Nelson with his all-absorbing cause. But the characters are too sketchily drawn to involve us emotionally.

Although *Promise of a Love Song* was billed as a premiere, the event had more the feeling of a workshop. There were even forms attached to the playbill inviting the audience to vote on a choice of titles, or to suggest one of their own. At present, this indeed is a promise of a love song. Hopefully, one day soon, the promise will be more fulfilled.

DALE WONG

# proscenium

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