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 artist, but it’s thousands of years old in any case. It seems love was not the absolute primordial poetic inspiration, it was surely near the top of the list.

Recently, Junehug 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 Prexgnos from New York and Roadside Theater from Kentucky. A member of each company scripted a segment, and director Steveh-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 vase, 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 for the 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’un,” and “this’n” and “that’n,” the woman tells of Billy’s dehumenization, and at times mischievous, attempts to deal with the world.

In the Puerto Rican segment (written by Rosalba Rolon), a brother and sister (Desmar Guevara and Jorge Mercado), 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 Q’Neal) gets off to an unexpected and beguiling start, as an African-American student named Donna LaFleur (Adelia Gautier) chronicles her Parisian adventures in the company of James Baldwin and the “Afro-literati.” LaFleur returns to the United States, gets a law degree from Yale, and is appointed by the NAACP to represent Nelson Hardie of his family. A rough ride in this respect is figured 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.

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