

THEATER REVIEW

New theater company's 'Love Match' a knockout

By ANN BENNETT
SENTINEL THEATER REVIEWER

A newly formed theater group that calls itself Jewel Theater Company is producing its inaugural show at the Actors' Theater in downtown Santa Cruz, and the delightful production proved a pleasant and very amusing experience for the opening night audience.

The evening's entertainment is made up of six short plays and six introductory musical "interludes" that serve to enhance the implications of the individual pieces. The project, entitled "Love Match," was created and designed by Julie James and Lance LaShelle, a couple of professional theater folks who not only dreamed up the concept but also direct and act in it.

Each of the six mini-plays features only those two performers, so you can readily imagine what a challenge they have taken on.

It would be easy to dismiss their efforts as self-serving — the show is clearly meant to showcase their combined talents — but fortunately for us, "Love Match" is much more than that.

Not only are James and LaShelle a couple of skillful actors, but they work together with exquisite camaraderie to develop the series of short views of life with nice warmth and a lively appreciation for the foibles of human relationships.

The selection of plays is cleverly chronological. The circumstances differ, the players are individual, and the issues are essentially

If You Go

WHAT: 'Love Match.'
WHEN: 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday, through Aug. 28.
WHERE: Actors' Theater, 1001 Center St., Santa Cruz.
COST: \$22
DETAILS: 778-7309; tickets are also available through the Santa Cruz Civic Box Office, 420-5260.

unrelated, but the mood moves forward in time with unexpected logic. In each of the half-dozen nicely crafted vignettes, the actors offer nutshell glimpses into the lives of assorted couples (well, the last one is only half of a couple) with awareness both subtle and hilarious and a sure, small sense of ruefulness.

The pieces focus mostly on the strong work of Julie James. In the early plays, she is vivacious and sometimes overly shrill but definitely the central figure; as she grows through the evening she achieves more depth of character and her acting skills, along with her ability to adopt convincing accents, are more apparent. LaShelle, on the other hand, remains mostly her foil — and it's his sense of comedy that contributes most of the laughs.

"Love Match" uses the concept of a boxing match to examine the stages of romance. The show begins with Round 1, "Brooklyn Zoo" (by playwright Joe Bonito), which examines an initial encounter between two unlikely candidates for romance, and is followed by "With or Without You" (Luigi Jannuzzi), a whimsical and

funny look at a convoluted couple: Mary is trying to break up, and George is determined to hold on.

"Make Like A Dog" (Jerome Kass) explores the dilemma of a couple who've no doubt been together long enough to settle into relationship ennui, and "Mr. Foot" (Michael Frayn) is a scathing and hilarious piece in which the remote LaShelle is treated to an exercise in sarcasm by his frustrated wife.

By Round 5, our couple has aged some more. "Night," by Harold Pinter, is a bittersweet play that mixes nostalgia with resigned contentment — a very nice piece of theater that James and LaShelle handle with fine expertise. The evening ends with a sensitive and poignant piece by Alan Bennett. "A Cream Cracker Under the Settee" features James at her best with excellent control and

fine timing.

The musical interludes (with accompaniment pre-recorded by Houston Jones) that preface the individual plays add to the fun. Both James and LaShelle are good vocalists and their delivery and choices of material combine to set the mood for the show. The country tunes set feet to tapping, and James' final number, "Ballad of a Runaway Horse" (Leonard Cohen), is an enchanting complement to the final play.

The two actors direct themselves, naturally, and also designed the attractively functional set (with lighting by Fabian Gauthier) and, of course, their own costumes. It's a lot of work and a lot of risk, but luckily for them "Love Match" is a knock-out.

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Chambers

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time at home for a while," said Chambers by phone from Salt Lake City. "It's been very hard being away from him."

The time home will be Chambers's first taste of

around the campfire.

Eventually, the Chambers family became the Dead Ringer Band, playing country/rock around Australia. Young Kasey began to get the audience's attention. Her parents are still part of her career; Father Bill plays lead guitar, Mother Diane handles KC's merchandise. Perhaps because of her

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