

Playhouse West stages lovely little musical

Review by Robert Lee Hall

Two couples in a snowbound house – it doesn't sound like much on which to build an engrossing musical play, but in the hands of Sarah Schlesinger, who wrote the lyrics, her co-author, Jonathan Bernstein, and composer, Mike Reid, the narrow confines of that house and its snowy yard become a setting for love and loss, explored with wit and grace.

Now in the world premiere of its first full staging, at Playhouse West in Walnut Creek, *In This House* is definitely one to see.

It should already be clear that the show isn't a thumping blockbuster *a la* Andrew Lloyd Weber, nor is it one of Jerry Herman's big, feel good romps. It's a chamber musical, intimate, small scale, and it's all the better for its narrow compass. It begins one December 31st, when Johnny D'Amato picks up his wife, Annie, at the airport. They've been married three years; he's a cop while she's a nurse who travels to far places, like Jakarta, to give aid to the afflicted. They don't have kids, and that's an issue between them.

As they're heading home, their car skids off an icy road into the stone wall of the isolated house of an older couple, Henry and Luisa Arden, who don't live there any longer but who visit it each year on New Year's Eve; some tragedy haunts them. There's no phone, and the car seems impossible to dig out, so the younger couple and the older couple have to spend time together, during which we're drawn into their two marriages, one long-es-



Photo by Charlie Jurrett

Michael Harrington (left), Gretchen Grant, Lynda DiVito, and Darrin Glesser appear in a satisfying production of *In This House*, playing at Playhouse West in Walnut Creek through March 2.

tablished, one new-fledged. We see how those marriages do, and don't, work – the love that binds them, the tensions that threaten them – and in the course of their revelations, the musical's authors demonstrate an old truth: that a very large world can be mirrored in just a few lives.

Schlesinger and Bernstein compose some of the wisest, smartest lyrics I've heard in some time, and Reid provides wonderful melodic lines on which to string them. Expertly directed by Lois Grandi, the cast is professional and engaging: Michael Harrington as the sturdy Henry, Gretchen Grant as his gracious wife, Luisa,

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Darrin Glesser as the intense, earnest Johnny, and Lynda DiVito as the vigorous, impassioned Annie. Dave Dobrusky provides fine piano accompaniment. Jan Zimmerman designed the evocative set, Krista Nelson provides the costumes and Anthony Powers paints scenes with discreet lighting.

A warmly satisfying pleasure, *In This House* plays at Playhouse West's newly refurbished theater on Locust Street in Walnut Creek until March 2, followed by Sherry Kramer's *When Something Wonderful Ends*. For tickets and information call 925-942-0300 or visit www.playhousewest.org.

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