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Theater: *Closer Than Ever* -- Maltby & Shire's Quiet Charm

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CLOSER THAN EVER *** out of ****
YORK THEATRE COMPANY

I can still remember buying the cast album to the original production of *Closer Than Ever* in 1990 back in Gainesville, Florida and wishing I could see the show in New York. One year later I moved to the city and the

first show I saw was another revue, *And The World Goes 'Round*, a Kander and Ebb tribute. *Closer* had already closed.

For most Off Broadway revues that didn't move to Broadway, that was the end of the road for New York. *Closer Than Ever* enjoyed many regional productions over the years but it wasn't until the York Theatre Company began its revival of Off Broadway musical works that Richard Maltby and David Shire's *Closer Than Ever* had a chance to return. Now after a 15 month series of productions of shows like *I'm Getting My Act Together and Taking It On The Road*, York is climaxing the series with this new revival, directed by Maltby himself. It's a classy finale to a bold program.

Closer Than Ever is a musical revue that gathers together songs Maltby & Shire had written previously for other shows (like the Broadway musical) but cut, one-offs or composed especially for this production, all of them stored at one point or another in what Maltby called "The Urban File." These songs focused in on middle age -- divorce, dating, kids, job insecurity, old friends, new challenges and the like.

"She Loves Me Not" follows the nice scene setter "Doors" and once probably seemed daringly funny. We see a man yearn for his female neighbor while she has eyes only for another male neighbor while *that* man has eyes only for the first guy. He's gay! Luckily, the song is nicely constructed though it might work better not played so broadly. Almost nothing else in the show has dated, though a few lines have been modestly tweaked to refer to DVRs, for example, and actors mime talking on cell phones when of course in 1989 they didn't really even have the Internet.

"You Wanna Be My Friend" is an hilarious number where a woman tells a man breaking up with her that the last thing she needs is a "friend." Jenn Colella brandishes a southern accent to very fun, Annie Oakley effect here. Christiane Noll is equally sharp on the tongue-twisting "The Bear, the Tiger, the Hamster and the Mole," in which a woman extolls the many possibilities of mating found in nature (most of them do

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no bode well for the male). And the comic high point is "There's Nothing Like It," a very fun lament about exercise in which the entire cast has a blast acting out their aches and pains and the frustration over Jane Fonda's workout (a dated reference they wisely retained).

More serious numbers appear, such as Sal Viviano's high point "One Of The Good Guys," a quiet tune about not cheating on your wife and the strength and satisfaction that provides. And Noll handles the roller coaster of "Life Story" nicely.

The first act ends strongly but as with so many shows, I always wonder if an intermission is helpful. *Closer Than Ever* was expanded from a one act revue but I can't help thinking it would maintain its momentum and be stronger without the interval and the removal of four or five songs that don't play as well as the others.

The tech elements are strong with a clean but elegant scenic design by James Morgan as a highlight. Maltby directs smoothly and turns the four actors (and two musicians who each get a turn in the spotlight) into a true ensemble. Inevitably, however tightly knit the group, you find your favorites and here the women outshine the men. George Dvorsky is a funny, engaging presence in act one but falters a bit in act two with several lesser tunes at his disposal. Noll has a voice perfect for the pop operas that dominated in the 1980s but modulates herself nicely and shines throughout. Viviano, I'm afraid, is the notable weak link. His voice isn't remotely as strong as the others and his onstage presence repeatedly has a supper theatre air that surely he and Maltby were not going for.

The first among equals is the marvelous Colella. I was lucky enough to see her hilariously out-there turn as the star of the New York Musical Theater Festival show *Kiki Baby* for which she deservedly won a top award and thought, "Who the heck is that?" My first impression has been fully borne out here for this star of Broadway's *Urban Cowboy* and *High Fidelity* and numerous more successful Off Broadway shows. Every time she returns to the stage, you smile. She nails the comic number of "Miss Byrd," the sexiness of "Back On Base" and any time there's a group number your eyes are drawn to her. She is one choice part away from Broadway stardom (or a sitcom hit). Isn't that precisely why you go to revues -- to dive into the catalog of an artist and maybe discover a talent you'll want to follow for years to come?

I love Maltby & Shire when they're in their quiet, observant, wry mode. They are the Cheever and Updike of musical theater. (What they could do with *Rabbit, Run!*) I find them consistently less engaging when going for the big Broadway moment, for songs of sentiment and large emotion. That may be why I was less taken with act two, which believes it is building emotionally by including numbers like "If I Sing" (in which a musician celebrates the love of music he learned from his father) and the similarly dramatic "Patterns" and "Fathers Of Fathers." But, in fact, it's the quieter and funnier numbers that are packed with emotion, the sort that sneaks up on you when you're not expecting it. When they don't strive for the big notes, Maltby and Shire are closer than ever to reaching them.

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Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review.

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with legendary singers, and make them her own.



Shoshana Greenberg: What Constitutes Political Theater: Talking with Food and Fadwa's Lameece Issaq and Nancy Vitale

Perhaps labeling plays and musicals as political theater does more harm than good. Should politics, whether they are at the center or on the periphery, make a difference in how a work is categorized?



Rachel Aydt: Up Close at Closer Than Ever

In Closer Than Ever, two men and two women sing about love, loss, friendship, exercise (?) and much more, all against the musical backdrop of a piano and an upright bass



Liz Smith: 'Rock of Ages': How Did It Crumble? (But Don't Cry For Tom Cruise--He's Got A Billion Dollars!)

Although I had a feeling "Rock of Ages" wasn't going to be a smash, I did think enough people would appreciate this obvious parody of 1980s music, fashions and attitudes to give it some box-office bang.

Around the Web:

[Closer Than Ever on Music Theatre International: Licensing Musical ...](#)

[Closer than Ever-2012 - nytimes.com](#)

[Video - Closer Than Ever: A Cult Classic Redefined](#)

[York Theatre Company's CLOSER THAN EVER Revival Begins ...](#)

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