Written by Mike Schulz
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Including pianist Craig Clough, there are five cast members in New Ground Theatre's *Closer Than Ever*, and at the show's opening-day matinée, that was one more person than the number of people who came to see it. This isn't the sort of thing I'd usually mention right off the bat, if at all, but I think it's an important point to make before proceeding, because while this vocally beautiful offering may be deficient in certain areas, the only thing Thursday's production was *really* lacking was an audience. And for this *particular* production, the absence of a crowd proved to be a considerable distraction.

Performed by the gifted Larry Adams, Tyson Danner, Sheri Hess, and Jackie Madunic, the show is a compilation of 21 self-contained musical numbers by Richard Maltby Jr. and David Shire, and offhand, I can think of no type of production tougher to produce in a nearly empty room than a musical revue. *Especially* a revue such as *Closer Than Ever*, which features no dialogue between songs, no plot, and not even much of a connecting theme. (Most of the songs concern relationships between spouses, lovers, and friends, but there are also bits on fitness, mid-life crises, and the omnipresence of Muzak.)

Consequently, the key relationships here are the ones developed between singer and audience, but with hardly anyone there for the singers to sing *to*, what happened on Thursday - at least for me - was *Closer Than Ever* succeeding as a vocal exercise but not, unfortunately, as a musical; I was impressed yet didn't necessarily *feel* much toward it. There are numbers in Maltby's and Shire's playlist that are hauntingly lovely (such as Madunic's gorgeous "Life Story" ballad) and wickedly clever (especially the Sondheim-esque curtain-raiser "Doors"), but without sufficient connection to the performers themselves, it rarely felt like we were being sung to on Thursday. It felt like we were being sung

at
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Given the dearth of options for eye contact, the performers frequently placed their focus over our heads or off to the side, as if lost in a private reverie. Because so many songs here deal with isolation, emptiness, and the inability to communicate, this was an acceptable-enough alternative, and may easily have been a stylistic choice of director Lora Adams. But no matter how strong the vocals, watching performers sing in an emotional vacuum doesn't do much for even a
small
audience, and the show's unvarying presentation - a song, a blackout, a quick stage reconfiguration, lights up, and two empty beats before Clough starts playing again - makes
Closer Than Ever
feel additionally empty. The transitions would be less
awkward with a larger crowd's applause covering the silences, but given its halting, start-and-stop quality, Thursday's performance too often felt like a really classy talent show. (The show's lighting design is so subtly effective that you wish scene changes were handled with lighting cues instead of blackouts.)

Thankfully, the talent on hand is pretty great. And in the numbers in which performers *do* conne ct with us, the show oftentimes crackles with life, especially during Hess' turn as a prim real-estate agent who conspiratorially relates news of the illicit sex she enjoyed just 20 minutes ago. With her eyes gleaming and her bashful smile widening into a shit-eating grin, Hess suggests a woman exhilarated by a previously unimagined freedom - in a neat touch, she spins on the wheels of her rolling office chair - and for a few minutes,
Closer Than Ever
is everything you want it to be: musically satisfying, lyrically witty, and performed with joy.

Hess is nearly as wonderful in the "Do You Want to Be My Friend?" number, when she snaps at Larry Adams with Southern-accented disdain, and there are terrific comic bits involving Danner as a seemingly friendly young man who turns out (hilariously) to be a creepy stalker, and Madunic as a veterinarian comparing modern-day dating practices to animals' mating habits. Plus, whenever the cast gets to loosen up as a foursome, such as in those fitness and Muzak routines, *Closer Than Ever* is spirited and lively; the cast members find inspiration through character, story, and one another. (For his part, Larry Adams is a supremely powerful vocalist, but his material here doesn't allow him much chance for levity.)

However, the rest of the time - which was roughly *half* the time - the performers on Thursday

seemed a little lost and off their game; Act I's opener found Clough (whose accompaniment, overall, is excellent) accidentally skipping several bars of music, and Act II's opener found its singers not *singing* several bars of music - two obvious goofs that were far more forgivable than the cell phone (*not* an audience member's) that rang at the end of one of Danner's solos.

Yet despite my misgivings, there's a considerable amount of skill on current display at the Village Theatre, and I'm hoping that the production's weekend performances played to the fuller houses its participants deserve. *Closer Than Ever* may have problems, but a paucity of talent is absolutely not among them.

For tickets, call (563) 326-7529.