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Based on the justly celebrated 1974 nonfiction by Studs Terkel, the musical *Working* is a two-act series of vignettes on the joys and frustrations of professional life, and the search for satisfaction in even the most mundane of careers. It's somewhat ironic, then, that in the Timber Lake Playhouse's current, wholly engaging, superbly performed production of the show, the most effective segment in it concerns a man who actually *doesn't* work for a living.

I stress that this is only *somewhat* ironic, though, considering that the retiree in question is being played by John Chase. A Timber Lake guest artist (and exceptional tenor) whose elegant, heartbreaking portrayal of the manservant Max in last summer's

*Sunset Boulevard*

may be permanently etched in memory, Chase, like his five co-stars, assumes a number of roles in director Chuck Smith's presentation. (

*Working*

features more than two-dozen individuals ruminating on their jobs or lack thereof, and is generally performed with a cast of at least 12.) But while the actor delivers thoughtful, empathetic interpretations of every figure he plays here, and scores big laughs with his big-business magnate and jovial construction worker, it's Chase's retiree Joe who really captures this musical's soul.

## Career Night: "Working," at the Timber Lake Playhouse through June 30

Written by Mike Schulz  
Monday, 25 June 2012 06:00

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Arriving toward the end of Act II, Joe – a character whom Chase’s physicality and vocal pitch suggest is in his late 60s or early 70s – croons a poignant, lightly melancholy number (composed by Craig Carnelia) explaining how he fills his days without a job to go to. Wistful yet spirited, and boasting lovely imagery, the song is a real beauty, and it’s an even better one when performed by somebody as skilled as Chase, who expresses Joe’s decency and fundamentally upbeat nature with good humor and beautifully understated grace. Yet when Joe recedes into a private reverie near the number’s finale – his beaming grin fading as he takes momentary stock of all that’s behind him – the desolation on Chase’s face is wrenching. The actor makes you understand that what having a career provides, even more than a paycheck, is *purpose*, and without that purpose, even the most contended among us will inevitably feel a bit lost. With music and lyrics by a half-dozen composers (among them Stephen Schwartz and James Taylor), *Working* features joyful songs and moving songs, and Joe’s funny, tender solo, as performed by Chase, is the best of both; like the musical itself, it’s less about making a living than just plain *living*.



The excellence of Chase’s number is hardly an aberration given the intimidating talents surrounding him. A fellow guest artist this season – and also fondly remembered from a 2011 Timber Lake musical, *The Spitfire Grill* – Judy Knudtson delivers a sweet, sad ballad as an aging elementary-school teacher struggling with changing times, and offers a knockout rendition of “It’s an Art,” sharing her character’s exuberant delight in her waitressing career. (I first fell in love with *Working* after accidentally landing on an *American Playhouse* broadcast of the show in 1982, and Knudtson’s cadence and vocals, amusingly, strongly echo those of Rita Moreno’s waitress in that PBS presentation.) Lending the production radiant stage charisma and wonderfully low-key comic authority, Sharriese Hamilton provides emotional heft to her solos in the Act I closer “If I Could’ve Been,” and is especially marvelous when belting out “Cleaning Women,” a soaring pop salute to service workers determined *not* to let their children follow in their footsteps. (In truth, the sole downside to having Knudtson and Hamilton in the cast is that *Working* is our single chance to enjoy them this summer; both guest performers, sadly, are only contracted for this one production.)

With memories of his confident, commanding Sky Masterson still fresh, Dryden Thomas Meints somehow tops his recent *Guys & Dolls* turn in a mere three minutes here; his

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parking-lot-attendant smoothie in *Working's* "Lovin' Al" number is looser, sexier, and funnier than anything I've seen the gifted actor do (to date) over the past two summers at Timber Lake. Partnering Meints sensationally on James Taylor's "Brother Trucker" anthem, Andrew Way delivers a heartfelt ode to the working class, and fathers, in his solo "The Mason." And while Erica Stephan is allowed perhaps fewer opportunities in the spotlight than her co-stars, the ones she does have are spectacular. A dazzling singer, Stephan's grocery-store cashier expresses her professional pride by breaking into a giddy, happy dance, and her rendition of Taylor's deeply affecting "Millwork" number is achingly fine; combined with James Beaudry's intentionally repetitive choreography, the performer's haunting vocals completely suggest the resignation and soul-draining monotony inherent in back-breaking assembly-line labor.



As much as I adore *Working*, I'll concede that a few of its songs strain to be more trenchant and touching than they actually are. The migrant-worker ballad "Un Mejor Dia Vendra," in particular, pushes its pathos, and "Just a Housewife," though well-sung by director Smith's three female actors, is incredibly maudlin – a doleful lament for those whose careers without salaries make them feel unappreciated and neglected. (Adding to the song's too-downbeat vibe here is the decision to costume the homemakers in nightgowns, suggesting that the women were simply too depressed to dress up for their big scene.) That latter number also, unfortunately, underscores a larger problem with the production, in that many – but not *all*

– of its attitudes and details, such as the employment of the term "housewife," feel tightly bound to the material's 1970s origins. Though the musical was originally produced in 1977, the book for Timber Lake's presentation now references computers and e-mail, and the show's gauche, lascivious gas-meter-reader is now a gauche, lascivious UPS man. (I wonder how UPS would feel about that change.) But these script alterations occur in tandem with lines and lyrics about Lovin' Al's 25-cent tips, and the schoolteacher's Palmer Method diploma for handwriting, and other mentions that make

*Working*

a bit of a museum piece; seeking meaning in one's career may be a timeless pursuit, but it's often difficult, in this production, to gauge what the show's time period is supposed to be.

Yet beginning with the opening notes heard from conductor/keyboardist Cindy Blanc's five-person orchestra – the score, on Thursday, augmented by what sounded like the cheerful whirring of power tools – Timber Lake's latest is terrific nonetheless, with Smith staging smart, memorable compositions on scenic designer Nathan Dahlkemper's functional, two-tiered playing area. (Designer Patrick Bley is also deserving of special props for his dexterous,

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occasionally ingenious sound effects.) And beyond offering topnotch entertainment, *Working*, in an added bonus, provides the answers to plenty of career questions you may have been hesitant to ask about. The music and Terkel's glorious re-told stories may get you in the door, but if you've always wondered about the decorum behind answering nature's call from atop an unfinished skyscraper, this is truly the show for you.

*Working runs at the Timber Lake Playhouse (8215 Black Oak Road, Mt. Carroll) through June 30, and tickets and information are available by calling [\(815\)244-2035](tel:(815)244-2035) or visiting [TimberLakePlayhouse.org](http://TimberLakePlayhouse.org)*