

VARIETY

Review: 'Taking Steps'

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Bob Verini (<http://variety.com/author/bob-verini/>)

Not a sex farce or even a want-to-have-sex farce, Alan Ayckbourn's 1979 "Taking Steps" is a "want to realize my full potential" farce bursting with need and self-absorption. Cannily recognizing a distinctively '70s brand of "Free to Be You and Me" cant running through the daffy proceedings, helmer Art Manke ladles a tasty gravy of disco and polyester over his briskly cheerful South Coast Rep production.

Up and down the three stories of leaky, decrepit manor house (and former brothel) the Pines, characters take steps to pursue what they pine for. Nouveau-riche bucket manufacturer Roland (Rob Nagle) considers buying the place so go-go dancer wife Elizabeth (Kirsten Potter) can play queen of the manor. Unbeknownst to him, she's enlisted her gormless brother Mark (Bill Brochtrup) in a scheme to break free of clingy Roland so as to follow her dream of becoming ballerina Anna Pavlova. Her stance echoes the attitude of the decade in question: I'm OK, you're irrelevant.

For his part, Mark is desperate to win back flower child Kitty (Emily Eiden), who's jilted him once before and, like everyone else, keeps falling asleep whenever he speaks. Builder Leslie (Louis Lotorto) has debts that only Mark's purchase will redeem. And drawn into all the intrigue is Ayckbourn's signature eye-of-the-hurricane milquetoast, stammering junior solicitor Tristram (Kasey Mahaffy), whose simple desire to get papers signed and go is foiled by uproariously escalating circumstances.

Farce-savvy helmer and cast deftly work through the careful exposition, and inevitable slow stretches, to make the most of Ayckbourn's verbal wit and increasingly preposterous physical comedy. Mightily contributing to the latter is the scenic gimmick of laying out building's three stories on the same flat stage; thesps "ascend" and "descend" with amusing variety. (The spiral staircase between middle floor and attic, requiring spins around a central pole, is a particular source of mirth.)

Requisite British ambience is mostly present, timing mostly impeccable, energy always high. The only element in short supply — and the cast may develop more of it during the run — is poignancy.

Apart from Mahaffy, whose every slight and disappointment strikes him to the core, characters' inner pain isn't matching thesps' outward bruises. We don't yet feel the sting when Roland or Mark reads a lover's farewell note, or when Leslie realizes the financial implications of a purchase offer withdrawn. The final images are devastatingly lit by Geoff Korf but right now feel unprepared for and unearned.

But if this "Taking Steps" hasn't yet reached heartbreak level, it's undeniably side-splitting, not the least because of Angela Balogh Calin's costumes. From Mark's leisure suit and Elizabeth's leg warmers to Tristram and Leslie's Village People motorcycle gear, patrons of a certain age will see the stage as a bilious mirror of what they used to be. Which won't forestall the irresistible need to shake one's booty when Lipps Inc. begs to be taken to "Funkytown."

Taking Steps

Segerstrom Stage; 509 seats; \$62 top

Production

A South Coast Repertory presentation of a play in two acts by Alan Ayckbourn.

Directed by Art Manke.

Creative

Sets (<http://variety411.com/us/los-angeles/sets-stages/>), Ralph Funicello; costumes, Angela Balogh Calin; lighting, Geoff Korf; sound and music, Steven Cahill; voice and dialect coach, David Nevell; stage manager, Julie Haber. Opened, reviewed May 24, 2008. Runs through June 15. Running time: 2 HOURS, 30 MIN.

Cast

Mark - Bill Brochtrup
Kitty - Emily Eiden
Leslie Bainbridge - Louis Lotorto
Tristram - Kasey Mahaffy
Roland - Rob Nagle
Elizabeth - Kirsten Potter