

LAST NIGHT

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Apr 25, 2008 04:30 AM

**RICHARD OUZOUNIAN**

Theatre Critic

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### Et si on chantait ...

★ ★ ★ (Out of 4)

Conceived and directed by Guy Mignault.

Until May 10 at Berkeley St. Theatre Upstairs, 26 Berkeley St. **416-534-6604**

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The musical revues that Théâtre Français de Toronto frequently use to lighten their seasons are invariably crowd-pleasing charmers and *Et si on chantait...*, which opened last night at the Berkeley St. Theatre Upstairs, is no exception.

Artistic director Guy Mignault has a knack of putting together songs in a seemingly random pattern that winds up yielding more cumulative substance than the average book musical. He also stages things with a disarmingly light hand and allows personality to triumph over pizzazz every time.

The end result may not be to the taste of those who would be entranced, for example, by *Dirty Dancing*, but for a more sophisticated theatregoer with a penchant for Gallic philosophizing, these shows are just the ticket.

This time around, the theme is the search for happiness throughout one's life and Mignault accomplishes it with some just-brief-enough narration (delivered with genuine sweetness by young Pierre Simpson) and three dozen songs that run the gamut from Charles Trenet to Luc Plamondon.

We get everything from Felix Leclerc's musings on the fragility of "La vie" to Pierre Perret's naughty childhood gallery of penis synonyms in "Le Zizi."

There's a healthy dose of the kind of francophone songs you would have heard playing in the background at Expo '67 as well as a dose of operetta, some melancholy musings about middle age and a moving finale that juxtaposes Plamondon's "L'hymne à la beauté du monde" with the amazing "Dégénération" by the contemporary Quebec folk group Mes Aïeux.

As usual, Mignault mixes his three veteran performers (Lyne Tremblay, France Gauthier and Robert Godin) with two relative newcomers (Amelie Lefebvre and Pierre Simpson) to fine effect. No one is better than Tremblay at delivering those bottom-of-the-barrel ballads from a woman who's seen it all and liked little of what she's seen. Gauthier excels at radiating a combination of maternal warmth with wicked wisdom and Godin is the essence of every beloved uncle who's donned a funny hat to entertain you at a party.

Lefebvre is that wide-eyed waif with a flower stuck in the neck of her guitar and Simpson tries with great appeal to act older than his years.

The five of them together radiate a quality of genuine humanity that holds the evening together more solidly than a million special effects ever could.

On the negative side, the show is about 15 minutes too long and I wish that some of the music wasn't so blatantly synthesized, but those are small complaints.

It's easy to sing the praises of *Et si on chantait ...*