

CLOSER THAN EVER

by Mark Hall Amitin

Running through Sunday, July 21, the Off-Broadway musical starring Karen Akers plays in the John Drew Theatre at Guild Hall in East Hampton.

The evening runs just under two hours and is non-stop music. With the exception of an intermission, it is song after song. *Closer Than Ever* is more a cabaret-style evening than a typical musical. Having neither book nor linking theme, the evening revolves around the cast of four performers: Karen Akers, Betsy Ann Leadbetter, Joe Bennett and Mark Waldrop, ably assisted by musicians Neil Semer and John Loehrke, and the music and lyrics of David Shire and Richard Maltby, Jr.

Maltby is the co-lyricist of the Broadway hit *Miss Saigon* and, along with Mr. Shire, wrote the score for *Baby* (1983) and *Starting Here, Starting Now*. (1977), *Closer Than Ever* won the Outer Critics' Circle Award for Best Musical during its 1989 run.

The score concerns itself with the themes of marriage, divorce, bringing up the kids, paying tuition, coming to grips with one's aging parents, love and desire. It strives for a Sondheimesque sophistication and wit. It is aided greatly by the statuesque and silky presence of Miss Akers, whose ever smooth and sultry moves keep one's eyes and ears carefully attuned. The great surprise here is the stellar talent of Betsy Ann Leadbetter, who can belt out a tune in the best Merman style

or give us as warm and cute a turn as Bernadette Peters.

The entire cast takes great care to bring itself beyond the proscenium arch and make what is essentially a small intimate evening

of song reach out to a full theatre. The often erudite and droll lyrics are deliciously displayed in Leadbetter's stunning delivery of *Miss Byrd*, which is jazzy and cleverly staged, and by Akers ("The past is prelude, get up tomorrow and take a qualude" and "He came back from limbo and found a bimbo and moved to New Rochelle") delivered in *I'm Not Complaining*, a delightful solo that covers a woman's life from first love to middle age with heartfelt and touching subtlety. The quartet story of "music" is quick and comic, asking why must we have music *everywhere* from the supermarket to the incinerator.

Act Two brings us more ennui and joie de vivre, first with the four performers singing in high vaudevilian on that old theme of *Friends*. But the highlight of the act by far is Karen Akers' marvelously subtle and scat-like duo with base player John Loehrke, *Back on Base*. The finale, *I've Been Here Before*, gives us a fine set of duets for both the men and the women.

It's a pleasant evening with warm personalities and lots of tunes, all part of the pastiche of various entertainments scheduled through the season at Guild Hall. Next up will be another Off-Broadway musical *Oil City Symphony*. For information and tickets, call Guild Hall: 516-324-4050.



The statuesque Karen Akers.