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THEATRE

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# Not cutting corners

Cornerstone has professionalism and hot tea  
Published January 28, 2010 by Lachlan Mackintosh in Theatre

When one says Canmore, lots of things come to mind — the Nordic Centre, Crazy Weed, Ha Ling Peak, the Olympics, and so on. But when one says Canmore, dinner theatre doesn't necessarily come to mind. Somewhat under the radar for the past decade, Cornerstone Theatre has made the *Oh Canada Eh?* dinner show a popular stop for summer tourist traffic, and lots of Bow Valley locals. In September 2009, Cornerstone broadened its scope to bring popular and proven live theatre to the Bow Valley by adding a Broadway winter season, and voilà....



*Putting It Together* (1993) is one of several Stephen Sondheim revues. In Los Angeles, the cast included Carol Burnett. In New York, this was the show that brought Julie Andrews back to Broadway after a 30-year absence. It features more than two-dozen tunes from the Sondheim songbook covering material from more than 10 musicals. Plucked from the original context, the songs coalesce into a timeless meditation on love and marriage as told by two couples: one lovestruck, about to be married, and the other, an older shadow couple, the people we might become; in other words, our parents.

To a younger crowd, Cornerstone Theatre might feel appealingly retro, a throwback to a time before the internet and TV, when people would gather in a room and break bread, make music, tell stories. Its log cabin-style design feels both comfy and rustic, its seating arrangement reminiscent of community hall weddings. There is a fireplace in the foyer when you come in from the cold, and an unmistakable small-town friendliness to the staff who greet and seat us.

As the meal begins, starting at 6:30 p.m., visitors and locals rub elbows at long tables, helping themselves to communal bowls of salad and rolls while drinks are served. There's a leisurely pace to the meal. The down-home menu is tasty and eclectic, and the tea is good and hot — an important detail. By the time the entertainment begins, at 8 p.m., those at our table have bonded. We sit back, ready to relax among friends.

Although Sondheim is considered "high art" in the musical theatre world, his commitment to thoughtful comedy blends well with Cornerstone's unapologetic penchant for slapstick and cheese. Pariss Greaves kicks the show off with humour and panache with some audience "instructions" before transitioning to his role as the featured couples' punchy commentator.

Sondheim's song titles almost tell the story: "Hello Little Girl," "Everybody Ought to Have a Maid" (apparently not just a Neil Young thing), "Rich and Happy," "Have I Got a Girl For You," "Good Thing Going," "Country House," "There's Always a Woman," "Marry Me A Little," "The Road You Didn't Take," and "Could I Leave You?"

Although some titles sound a bit dated, Sondheim strikes to the contradictory heart of the matter, and Cornerstone's accomplished cast of local and returning actors and singers mine a poignant mix of wisdom and idealism, humour and hypocrisy, tenderness and sarcasm. While contemporary treatments of domestic tensions tend to be violent, wrought with anxiety and fatalism, Sondheim's show tunes embrace and celebrate these common marital yearnings and strivings: a couple's need for domestic help, a severe case of premarital panic, a man's love of pretty women and a woman's desire to be lovely.



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Sondheim is clearly great material for the music theatre artist as well. The women have many of the best lines in the show. Both Louisa O’Keane and Karen Minish have big, beautiful voices, and delivered their Sondheim non sequitours and syncopated rhymes with style and joie de vivre. The guys had to work hard to keep up with them. Greaves was fun as the odd man out, J.P. Thibodeau dashing as the younger man, and Joe Morris brought some real pathos to his performance as the older husband.

Over by 10 p.m. the two-act play kept us talking on the short drive home.

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