

THEATER

'Closer Than Ever' finds music in the mundane

By Richard Guzman

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There isn't a traditional storyline running through this musical — or characters with actual names — but International City Theatre is betting that the audience will easily find a personal connection with its season opener, "Closer Than Ever."

The two-act musical by lyricist Richard Maltby Jr. and composer David Shire runs tonight through March 6.

It's made up of 24 numbers that are self-contained songs with lyrics that touch on various life topics.

"They're very personal human stories, very simple, very intimate," said Todd Nielsen, who's directing the musical. "At times very funny, at times very touching, but it all deals with people sort of in the middle of their lives."

The stories touch on new love, parenting, marriage, divorce and dating after divorce, even frustrations with work.

The simple premise and smart lyrics about ordinary people earned the musical the Outer Critics Circle Award for best off-Broadway musical and a Drama Desk nomination for Maltby Jr.



PHOTO BY TRACEY ROMAN

The cast of "Closer Than Ever," rehearses for the show at International City Theatre. The production opens tonight at Center Theater in Long Beach and runs through March 6.

and Shire.

"The audience does tend to identify with the show very much," Nielsen said. "I think there are songs that will touch many people in different ways.

"It's really wonderful, wonderful lyrics all placed on really lovely melodies and lively melodies, but really it's very much about the lyrics," he added.

The two dozen songs are per-

formed by four actors whose characters are only identified as "Woman 1" or "Man 2." A piano and bass player onstage are also part of the show.

It's been quite a task for the actors to learn so many songs, but many of them have used their own life experiences to interpret the material.

One such actor is Studio City resident Kevin Bailey, who ap-

CLOSER THAN EVER

When: Opens tonight, 8 p.m. Thursday-Saturday, 2 p.m. Sunday through March 6.

Where: Center Theater, Long Beach Performing Arts Center, 300 E. Ocean Blvd.

Tickets: \$55 opening night, \$47-\$49 thereafter.

Information: 562-436-4610, www.iclongbeach.org.

pears in 13 numbers including a song called "If I Sing."

Maltby and Shire wrote the tune as an homage to their fathers, and Bailey connected with it right away.

"It is the most beautiful loving tribute to the father of the writer, and it is so easy for me to get into the mind-set of singing to my own father, who was such an incredible influence on my life and remains so to this day," he said.

Valerie Perri, a Sherman Oaks resident also performing in the show, thinks the musical will draw people in with some humor, but then really touch them with its universal themes.

"It's funny, but then it'll all of the sudden hit you in the head like, 'Wow, man that's me,' or 'That's my neighbor,'" she said. "And I find those kind of stories to be great fun."