

# 'Bittersuite's' creative team succeeds once again in 'Tune the Grand Up'

By TOM JACOBS  
Daily News Theater Critic

The spellbinding success of "Tune the Grand Up," the revue of Jerry Herman songs that opened at the Back Alley Theatre Tuesday night, is no surprise. After all, the same creative team that produced "Bittersuite" — one of the finest shows of 1988 — put together this rousing revue.

The structure of the two shows is virtually identical: Both are cleverly choreographed, five-person theater pieces that contain no dialogue. But the two revues are delicious for different reasons.

"Bittersuite" was a chance to discover a fantastic new composer-lyricist team (Elliot Weiss and Michael Champagne). Its Sondheimesque lyrics contained a stream of insights into contemporary existence.

Herman, in contrast, has little to say beyond "Enjoy life!" But as this show proves, he has managed to say it in surprisingly varied (and supremely entertaining) ways over the years.

Though at least half the songs in "Tune the Grand Up" will be familiar to musical-theater fans, the show also contains some discoveries — songs from such little-known shows as "Milk and Honey" "Dear World" and "The Grand Tour." Some of these are absolute gems — notably "Kiss Her Now" from "Dear World," "Wherever He Ain't" from "Mack and Mabel" (which is given a rousing rendition by Sharon Murray) and "I Won't Send Roses" (an oddly anti-romantic love song from "Mack and Mabel").

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The cast of "Tune the Grand Up," clockwise from left: Maureen Mershon, Carol Woodbury, Sharon Murray, Mark McGee and Brad Blaisdell.

## THE FACTS

- **The play:** "Tune The Grand Up."
- **Where:** Back Alley Theatre, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys.
- **When:** 8 p.m. Tuesdays and Wednesdays, 10 p.m. Fridays, 3 and 10 p.m. Saturdays, indefinitely.
- **Starring:** Maureen Mershon, Sharon Murray, Brad Blaisdell, Mark McGee and Carol Woodbury.
- **Behind the scenes:** Music and lyrics by Jerry Herman. Conceived and written by Paul Giler. Choreographed by Carol Woodbury. Musical director Nelms McKelvin. Directed by Rick Roemer.
- **Tickets:** \$14.50 to \$18.50. For more information, call (818) 780-2240.
- **Our rating:** ★★★★★  
★★★★ — don't miss it; ★★★ — worth your while; ★★ — has its moments; ★ — if you must; ○ — don't bother.

song to song. Much of the credit for its smooth flow must go to music director Nelms McKel-

vain, who also provided some of the clever musical arrangements.

Director Rick Roemer wisely plays most of the songs straight, though he also gives some of them a welcome satirical edge. Particularly clever is his staging of "It Takes a Woman," a decidedly male-chauvinist song from "Mame." He has the two men sing the verses straight — and the three women sing the chorus in a mocking, sarcastic tone.

Roemer's casting is also nicely non-clichéd. Rather than the young, beautiful people you usually find in this sort of show, he cast five people of various ages and shapes. It's nice to see two middle-aged people sing a love duet.

Roemer isn't in the show, and his comic presence is missed. But the cast is strong, and one member is a knockout: soprano Maureen Mershon. Her rendition of "Nelson," a ballad from "A Day in Hollywood" in which a woman lists her man's deficiencies as a lover and an actor, is hilarious. So is her performance of "Gooch's Song," in which a pregnant woman asks her mentor, "What do I do now?"

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It's typical of the show's cleverness that her question is immediately answered with the song "Tap Your Troubles Away." Another nice touch: the song "Bosom Buddies" from "Mame" is turned into a duet for Herman's two great heroines, Dolly and Mame.

The total professionalism extends to every aspect of the show. Typically, Don Nelson's black-and-white costumes manage to be attractive without calling attention to themselves. The focus stays, appropriately, on the music.

One quibble: The home movie that opens the second act goes on far too long. Otherwise, "Tune the Grand Up" is a total joy. Put on your Sunday clothes, grab your bosom buddy, and head for the Back Alley — before the parade passes by.