

An enormous affair in a small theater, 'The Bed' follows a couple from their wedding night through death.

By MICHAEL RYDZYNSKI
FOR THE SUN POST NEWS

Superb acting enhances an already intriguing and intelligently presented "study" on the life of a marriage in "The Bed."

The current Camino Real Playhouse production, enjoying its world-premiere run through Jan. 28 is also an enormous affair for such a small community theater, being a multimedia presentation involving interludes that consist of photographs projected onto a screen to a live musical accompaniment.

While there were the inevitable glitches on opening night, there is a promising potential that makes a return visit to the comedy-drama almost a must.

Written by Nikos Vlachos, a Chicago doctor who has written and published other plays and who admitted to being inspired by the movie version of "The Four Poster" to write this play, "The Bed" is directed with great sensitivity by artistic director Michael Wallot of Dana Point. The play follows a couple, Joe Isaia (Mario Rossi) and Sara Laramee Isaia (Kate Smiley), from their wedding night through death.

Six scenes "selected" from their lives spent together run the gamut from giddy, hormone-driven young people in their 20s to cold and distraught middle-aged folks to a renewed kind of love in their old age.

In this regard, it is not unlike Jan de Hartog's 1951 Tony-winning (Best Play, Best Director) comedy "The Four Poster," covering a marriage's first 35 years and starring the real-life husband-and-wife team of Hume Cronyn and Jessica Tandy. It was made into a 1952 Oscar-nominated movie (co-written by de Hartog and Allan Scott) featuring Rex Harrison and Lilli Palmer, then later mu-



MARIO ROSS and Kate Smiley star in "The Bed," written by Nikos Vlachos, now playing at the Camino Real Playhouse.

sicalized back on stage, as a vehicle for Robert Preston (who won a Tony for it) and Mary Martin, in 1966 as "I Do! I Do!" by "The Fantasticks" team of Harvey Schmidt (music) and Tom Jones (lyrics and book). In fact, one thread runs through all of them: the pillow on which is inscribed "God is Love," which is commented on in the other works but not in "The Bed."

Vlachos has expanded the time frame, which now covers 62 years, from 1983 to 2045, but has maintained the one symbol of stability through all those years that also appeared in the older works: a bed (known as a "four-poster" in the early 20th century), which Joe, a painter who does portraits, gives to his bride Sara, a nurse, on their wedding night.

Rossi plays Joe with a kind of naive cluelessness and lack of insight into his wife's feelings that he, Joe, finally comes to realize. Yet Rossi is careful not to make Joe appear heartless, stupid or self-serving and

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therefore maintains likeability for his character, even when he (unintentionally) hurts Sara.

And Smiley covers a wide range of emotions, going from well-grounded yet happy, to frustrated and neglected, to, at one point, overly giddy and joyful (for a reason soon made obvious). When her character reveals a secret that hurts Joe, Smiley has managed not to lose Sara's likability with the audience as well.

Both thespians show flawed yet goodhearted people who go through the ups and downs of marriage as even the best of couples will. The most amazing thing is that Rossi and Smiley make their characters so

'THE BED'

What: Camino Real Playhouse presents the World Premiere run of "The Bed," featuring Mario Rossi and Kate Smiley; written by Nikos Vlachos, directed by Michael Wallot, company artistic director.

When: Continues through Saturday, Jan. 28, at 8 p.m. Friday-Saturday and Thursday, Jan. 19 and 26, with 2 p.m. matinees Sunday.

Where: Camino Real Playhouse, 31776 El Camino Real, San Juan Capistrano.

Cost: \$18 (Opening Night: \$25).

Information: (949) 489-8082; www.caminorealplayhouse.org.

believably natural, flexible and oh-so-comfortable with each other. It's not two fine actor pretending they're a married couple, they *become* a married couple. (The opening scene and the interlude that follow present some steamy moments between husband and wife that may not be suitable for children under 13.)

And it is to Vlachos' credit that he presents just enough of Joe and Sara's lives, with literate yet still credible dialogue that leaves the audience hungering to know more about them.

Kudos also to Beverly Blake Playhouse vice-president and the co-producer, with Playhouse president Tom Scott, of "The Bed." She not only took the photos shown during the interludes - sometimes taken under trying circumstances - but, being a visual artist like Joe, also painted Joe's lifetime-in-the-making portrait of Sara in its various stages, each stage corresponding to a different scene in the couple's lives.

The interludes are accompanied by a live performance of one of J.S. Bach's unaccompanied cello suites, beautifully and movingly performed by Elizabeth Moulton of Mission Viejo off to one side of the stage, with each movement perfectly setting the mood and feel of the scene to follow.