WE'RE A HAPPY FAMILY  Cabrillo Stage's restaging of Joe Ortiz's 'Escaping Queens' runs through Aug. 18.

Something Borough
Reworked 'Escaping Queens' packs in even more  BY LILY STOICHEFF

Unlike the other traditional powerhouse on the bill at Cabrillo Stage's Crocker Theatre this season, 'Escaping Queens' isn't showy or glamorous. It's intimate and charismatic, at times hilarious and often heartbreaking. Performed in the small Black Box Theatre, the audience is invited to partake in a pivotal moment in writer Joe Ortiz's childhood in 1950s Queens, New York, as his family struggles to survive hardships brought on by his gambling and philandering father, and take risks that will alter their lives forever.

'Escaping Queens' premiered last year at Cabrillo Stage and sold out 11 shows weeks in advance, partly due to local celebrity of its author. Those lucky enough to see it loved it, and musical director Jon Nordgren invited Ortiz and director Greg Fritsch back again for 2013. 'Escaping Queens 2.0' has been re-worked, re-staged and re-cast, and, although some structural difficulties remain, it is exceptionally entertaining.

The most captivating element of this show is the music. A five-piece ensemble, conducted by Max Bennett Parker, showcase their skill and versatility through more than 30 original songs inspired by the doo-wop, jazz, salsa and traditional old-world melodies Ortiz grew up listening to on the radio and in the streets of his neighborhood. There are one or two numbers that are hilarious, including a lively medley sung by the father in drag, but Ortiz's songwriting really shines when his characters show their souls and express their frustrations, hopes and longings. The melancholy becomes palpable in the small, confined space.

Vanessa Alvarez as Marna and Adam Sucreco as husband Herman share considerable chemistry as they struggle for power in their household. The audience catches glimpses of their love, and shares in their frustration as it becomes clear how despairing their marriage has become. Samantha Pistoreti charmingly performs their wide-eyed and love-struck teenage daughter Laura opposite Danny Gould as her bad-boy sweetheart, Johnny. Josiah Frampton, the sole returning cast member, resurrects his double role as Manny, Laura's earnest suitor, and Freddy, the menacing bookie intent on collecting Herman's debts. Devon DeLeon draws huge laughs as Little Joey. 'Escaping Queens' is an engaging look at the choices and sacrifices one family makes to stay together.

'Escaping Queens'  
Through Aug. 18  
Crocker Black Box Theatre, Aptos