New musical, "Lunch," launches at Cabrillo Stage

You can't get much further off-Broadway than Cabrillo Stage, at least geographically. Yet CS may be instrumental in launching a new musical on the road with its spirited production of "Lunch." Instead of its usual year-end holiday production, CS opted this season for a new year's show, a modern urban fable about life, love, answered prayers, and second chances—a subject the authors know something about.

With a book by Emmy-winning TV writer Rick Hawkins, and songs by award-winning composer Steve Dorff and lyricist John Bettis, "Lunch" was first produced in 1994, when it went on a five-city national tour. Its collaborators moved on to other things until a series of serendipitous events—including a request from CS Artistic Director Jon Nordgren—to meet and reconvene in 2013 to revamp the show. This CS production of "Lunch" has a rewritten and updated book, 10 new songs, and a hard-working cast directed with verve and chutzpah by CS veteran Andrew Ceglio.

When conductor Nordgren raises his baton in the pit, we hear not the expected musical overture, but a montage of city sounds—footsteps, bits of conversation, traffic, a hot dog vendor, screeching brakes. The curtain rises on a scirm of heavenly clouds and an omatate gate which admits a confused Mackenzie Richards (the affable and reliable Max Bennett-Parker) into a reception area presided over by chain-smoking, unfailable Mona (a very funny Samantha Pistorio). Mackenzie, who's just met his unlively demise via hot dog cart, finds himself knocking on Heaven's door, but given his line of work as a Wall Street player, he'll be fast-tracked straight to Hell unless he can prove himself worthy.

Mackenzie has one hour, from noon to 1 p.m. (the "Lunch Shift"), to answer the prayers of four random people in downtown Manhattan. His helper is a bum on the street (played with relish by scene-stealing Nicholas Ceglio), a "lost soul" disconnected from his mortal body, even he doesn't know who he is. Mackenzie is also equipped with a hot dog cart of his own, an ingenious device that speaks to him in Mona's caustic voice, features a digital screen that provides occasional commentary, and careers around the stage seemingly of its own free will. (Kevin Johnston is credited as "Hot Dog Cart Operator." Whatever that means, he does a great job.)

Mackenzie's supplicants come from all walks of life. Mateo (Adam Saucedo), a construction worker and PTSD-afflicted vet rebuilding the World Trade Center, longs to escape his wartime flashbacks and reintegrate into normal society. Pampered matron Carol (a terrific Sherry Hussey), who's just spent a fortune on cosmetic reconstruction, hopes to rekindle the romantic interest of her business tycoon husband. A young woman, Bonnie (a very affecting Kristen Schmitz), longs for closure with her dying father before her priest brother, Father Mike (Marcus Boardman) pulls the plug on his life support.

The fourth story concerns Mackenzie's lover, career woman Sophia (Ashley Rae Little, with her big, powerhouse singing voice), who suddenly finds herself alone and pregnant. (Mackenzie inhabits the bodies of various innocuous bystanders when he's among the living, so "disguised" as a room service waiter, he and Sophia can interact without her recognizing him.) But despite the engaging performers, this is the least satisfying story because it's unclear what Sophia's prayer is, or how Mackenzie answers it.

In general, the prayers are so nebulous, the audience isn't always sure what's being asked for or how they are resolved. This premise needs to be brought into sharper focus. The hospital vignette works best, when Bonnie voices poignantly in song what she always needed from her father, and then receives it, to great, teary effect, in the end. If only all the stories had a payoff this powerful. (One other caveat: there's a bit too much smoke onstage throughout the production.)

But the singers are strong in this show, and ensemble numbers like "Who I Am," the soulful "I Used To Love This Town," and the Act II curtain raiser "Heaven Help Us" (revealing that the city is bustling with unanswered prayers) are the most dynamic. Skip Epperson's marvelously three-tiered set connects all the locations—rooftop, hospital ICU, swanky bistro, hotel room—with a network of girders and ladders, and a central elevator that conveys Mackenzie up and down between the stories (and storeys). And it's a treat for local theater lovers to see a new show on its way up.

"Lunch" runs Thursdays-Saturdays through Jan. 19 at Cabrillo College's Crocker Theater, 6500 Soquel Drive, Aptos. Tickets are $18-44. Call 479-6154 or visit cabrillostage.com.