Samantha Pistoressi is Heaven’s receptionist and Max Bennett-Parker the recently deceased Wall Street salesman in Cabrillo Stage’s production of ‘Lunch.’

Cabrillo serves as lab for promising musical ‘Lunch’

(by JOANNE ENGELHARDT)

The original musical “Lunch” is an ambitious endeavor for the Cabrillo Stage team of artistic director Jon Nordgren and director/ choreographer Andrew Ceglio to tackle. Together with the play’s three creators, they offer Santa Cruz area theatergoers an opportunity to see a production which, someday, may find its way to Broadway.

It still has a long way to go (meaning it needs more revisions), but still “Lunch” is an opportunity to see a musical that has raw energy, some dialogue zingers and boffo acting, especially by Max Bennett-Parker as Mackenzie, a Wall Street stockbroker who walks outside his office to buy a hot dog from a hot dog cart, but instead is run over by a taxi that, he laments, “made ground chuck out of my heart.”

Said hot dog cart almost steals the entire show (thanks to Kevin Johnson’s playful, alert driving). The “electric” cart (pun intended) charges in with bells ringing, multi-colored lights blinking and literally tap dances across the stage. The cart itself is “humanized” by the voice of Mona (Samantha Pistoressi), a sassy, chain-smoking diminutive diva in a silver wig. Pistoressi is magnificent as Mona, the “receptionist” at the gates of Heaven who literally tells Mackenzie where to go (hint: It’s quite hot there), due to the less-than- stellar life he’s lead.

When Mackenzie pleads for a chance to do better, Mona explains there are four rules for getting into Heaven. Basically, he has one (lunch) hour to make the prayers of four people come true, with help from said hot dog cart and a bum (charmingly underplayed by Nicholas Ceglio).

Unfortunately, that’s when Rick Hawkins’s book (story) begins to unravel. Four diverse events (one in a restaurant, one in a hospital, one on a construction site and the last in a hotel room) are sometimes difficult to grasp, especially the restaurant scene where mother Carol (overplayed by Sherry Hursey) and her tech-addicted son Kyle (Adam Stanton) are awaiting the arrival of their uber-businessman husband/dad Robert (Steven Guire Knight who never quite creates a believable character). Hursey talks a lot, puts on a fat suit and sings while exercising and she can really belt out a song. Yet the scene itself seems garbled, rushed and unrealistic.

The construction site location also was somewhat incomprehensible, due, in part, to a couple of mics not working on Saturday night. This meant that Mateo’s (an earnest Adam Suedes) solo was all but lost.

Better are the scenes of daughter Bon- nie (a clear-voiced Kristin Schmitz) at the bedside of her dying father, and the hotel room where Ashley Rae Little as agitated businesswoman Sophia (pregnant with Mackenzie’s child) finds comfort and solace in, of all places, the arms of a bell hop (Bennett-Parker).

Actually, the fact that both Bennett- Parker and Ceglio play multiple characters is one of the story devices that really works. Thanks to the dynamic set created by Skip Epperson (a two-story “building” separated by an elevator in the middle), all four scenes are visible at all times.

The cast includes…”

{ THROUGH JAN. 19 Thursdays-Saturdays at 7:30 p.m., Sundays at 2 p.m. Cabrillo Stage, Cabrillo Crocker Theater, 6500 Soquel Dr., Aptos. $22-42; (831) 479-6154 or www.cabrilostage.com }

JAN MARCUS/CONTRIBUTED

{ SATURDAY 7 p.m. Peace United Church of Christ, 900 High St., Santa Cruz. $20 general; $50 VIP seating; $15 senior; $5 student. tylerhayfordhaiyanbenefit.eventbee.com. }

AUSTIN JENCKES

Fans of NBC’s ‘The Voice’ will certainly remember last season’s finalist Austin Jenckes, the fine singer from Washington state. Jenckes is wasting no time in capitalizing on his success on ‘The Voice’ with a new tour showcasing his country/pop lyricism.

{ JAN. 16 8:30 p.m. The Catalyst, 1011 Pacific Ave., Santa Cruz. $10 advance; $12 at the door. www.catalystclub.com. }

ALSO ON STAGE

TYLER HAYFORD
Talented 17-year-old pianist Tyler Hayford is performing on Saturday in an effort to raise money for victims of the recent super typhoon in the Philippines. The program features performances of pieces from J.S. Bach, Beethoven and Rachmaninoff, and all the proceeds from ticket sales will go directly to relief efforts in the Philippines.

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