

## Arts & Entertainment:

### 'Sylvia' Comes to Life at the Ashby Stage

*By Ken Bullock, Special to the Planet*  
*Thursday February 18, 2010*

The cats not only talk, they sing—at one point, in an over-the-top performance of what must be their national anthem—or prowl above the soapy-looking cardboard bubbles overflowing their mistress' forlorn tub, hypnotizing her to relieve her anxieties of homelessness ... and maybe score an open can of tuna while Sylvia's in a trance.

Sylvia, the acerbic comic-strip heroine, her feisty cats, barroom buddies and stiflingly close-knit circle of old girlfriends, bring Nicole Hollander's creation into the third dimension, not to mention song-and-dance, in Sylvia's Advice on How to Age Gracefully on the Planet Denial, Stagebridge's new musical comedy. Going into its last weekend at the Ashby Stage, the show has been thronged with mostly female crowds of dyed-in-the-wool Sylvianers, who let out a collective groan when Stagebridge's greeter mentioned that the strip had been dropped by Hollander's hometown paper, the Chicago Tribune.

With the Planet Denial glowing above Russ Milligan's colorful set, Bay Area comic actress and clown Joan Mankin holds forth as the sharp-tongued negative-advice yenta, advertised by her own creator as the last person you'd seek advice from. To her shriek of dismay, a phone call informs her she is getting evicted—and so begins Sylvia's odyssey of support-seeking, while preserving her own values of catty independence, habitual obliviousness, and yes, denial.

Her search for answers—or, more accurately, straight lines for tart rejoinders—brings her old girlfriends Bitsy, Audrey and Sally (Linda Sciacqua, Kris Welch and Cindy Carrico) trooping into her threatened abode, to celebrate their lifelong friendship and mull over whether and how they can (or should) go all the way in commitment, living together while aging.

The action—or Sylvia's studious avoidance of it in favor of talk—spills over into Harry's Bar, where the ever-present Fred (Bill Liebman) oils his charms for older women, and its old shoe bartender Harry (James "JB" Brooks) endeavors to cheer Sylvia up by singing an upbeat blues dirge, "Even When Life's Terrible, It's Good." ("It's good to have these little chats with you, Harry," the advice queen observes; "I often think of them when I'm having too good of a time.")

Meanwhile, Lassie the Wonder Cat (clown Sarah Moore) and her opposite number, Kismet (Franklin Hall), preen and strut, look on and dissimulate, comment and deliver reaction takes to the freaks and flurries of irrational human behavior, as they contemplate and discuss the merits of hibernation or throwing up on the couch.

This sense of a kind of verbal pinball machine with its bumpers lighting up and sounding off is the closest the musical approaches what someone aptly referred to as the “non sequitur” quality of the cartoon strip, absurdities (some of them straight from the news) bouncing off the walls and echoing in offstage voices, mouthed by planet-hopping extraterrestrials or carefully explained by fantasy images or in Sylvia’s own soliloquies and monologues.

The story bogs down a little and dulls the barbs of its original’s plotless zingers. Scumbly Koldewyn’s two-fisted piano playing of his songs (with adaptor-director Martha Boesing’s often-clever lyrics) cut the slack moments nicely, but never quite bring about what Bertolt Brecht divined when he pronounced prewar and 1940s musical comedy as America’s gift to world theater: a stream of vaudeville or burlesque sketches and routines that burst into song, a parallel to European modern theater, born of “the pregnant moment” of staged tableaux joined to the rediscovery of popular entertainment, of circus, sideshow and music hall.

(Funny, because Koldewyn, that vet of The Cockettes, has come up with tunes from across the spectrum of the American Songbook—including a few with leads from Brecht and Weill.)

If the songs and the cats’ ultra-feline antics—and Hollander’s saucy original lines—make the show, that’s saying a lot right there, and can’t downplay the contributions of the cast, half of them Stagebridge regulars, Joan Mankin in particular, who has realized Sylvia’s dour deadpan as upbeat shtick, preaching Denial-as-Therapeutic-Technique.

It doesn’t quite capture the essence of the strip, as a few previous musicals have of their originals, You’re a Good Man, Charlie Brown a case in point, though with no other points of comparison. Not having seen the other two adaptations of Hollander’s strip, I’d guess Sylvia almost as hard to theatricalize as Krazy Kat, though not impossible. Maybe a more cabaret-ish approach, especially given Scumbly’s eclectic, lively numbers that suggest softshoe and buck-and-wing, would make a more comfortable fit, while preserving Hollander’s scattergun wit.

But for Sylvia’s countless fans, even more innumerable cat lovers and many devotees of American popular song, Sylvia is a must-see. And for those seeking good advice or easy enlightenment—forget it!

SYLVIA’S ADVICE ON HOW TO AGE GRACEFULLY ON THE

PLANET DENIAL

Presented by Stagebridge at 8 p.m. Thursday–Saturday and at 2 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays through Feb. 21. Ashby Stage, 1901 Ashby Ave. \$15-\$25. 444-4755.