

Porchlight's double-header celebrates Finn

By Michael Phillips

Tribune theater critic

In 1981, the year a medical journal reported the unexplained deaths of five gay men in Los Angeles, a wonderful musical called "March of the Falsettos" opened off-Broadway. It introduced composer/lyricist William Finn to a large New York audience, in a production of such wit and kinetic exuberance—all the set pieces were on casters, flying around the stage; even the actors seemed to be on casters—no one who saw it forgot it.

It was, heartbreakingly in retrospect, a defiant pre-AIDS musical. No grand statements or earnest homilies. It was simply and vividly about a tight-knit (and sometimes near-strangling) group of New Yorkers, some gay, some straight. The story was driven by Marvin, a deeply closeted character Finn created for an earlier show, "In Trousers."

In the '81 show Finn drew up Marvin's situation in quick, sharp strokes: "Well, the situation's this/It's not hard to comprehend/I divorced my wife/I left my child/And ran off with a friend," the friend being a young man named Whizzer. The show is about a man who left the closet and found his life, with all its difficulties.

With these Marvin musicals Finn proved the theory that, like politics, all neurosis is local, and from the local comes the universal. How could you not like musicals with songs such as "Four Jews in a Room Bitching"? Or "Marvin's Giddy Seizures"? Or "Everyone Tells Jason to See a Psychiatrist"? Regarding "March of the Falsettos," who could resist a score of such vibrancy and charm, culminating in a moving entreaty ("Father to Son") in which Marvin asks his hurting son simply to "sing for yourself, while we march along"?

Porchlight Music Theatre's "Finn Festival" celebrates these and other works of a composer/lyricist well worth celebrating anytime. The first two of the four Porchlight productions opened over the weekend, in an uneven but lively double-header. "In Trousers," directed by Matthew Gunnels, runs in repertory through mid-April with "Falsettos," directed by Steve Scott. The first act of "Falsettos" (which Finn wrote with co-librettist James Lapine) is a revised version of "March of the Falsettos": the

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second act, originally called "Falsettoland," pulls Marvin and company into the sobering age of AIDS.

"In Trousers" is a youthful, somewhat fuzzy work, in which a tentatively heterosexual Marvin (Joe Schenck, very good) mulls the women in his young adult life: The high school kid who became his wife; his teacher, Miss Goldberg; and his high school sweetheart. It's a coming-out-of-the-closet chamber musical, often very funny (Marvin's imagined seduction of Miss Goldberg is a killer), sometimes ragged and unfocused.

Director Gunnels has reordered and reinstated material. The production is better sung than acted, but Schenck hits just the right opaque diffidence for charming, self-absorbed, bratty Marvin.

In Porchlight's "Falsettos," we have an inversion: The Marvin isn't right, but some of the supporting characters shine. In



Aaron Graham's "Falsettos" character, Mendel (right), tells Jason, played by Mitch Hollis, that everyone hates his parents.

this show, Marvin, older now but still immature and hotheaded, is played by Nate Johnson, who tends to underline and over-emote every little emotional shift in every song.

Director Scott respects the perpetual-motion strategy of Finn's remarkable score and the Finn/Lapine libretto, though there's a lapse in taste in the song "March of the Falsettos," here dolled up with inflatable genitalia. The show works most satisfyingly when center stage is taken by Aaron Graham's Mendel. In his zip and

comic topspin he is nearly up to Broadway level.

The material's flaws (mostly in "In Trousers") don't matter, because so much of what Finn writes—whatever he's writing about, love, lust, whining yuppie scum, needless angst, necessary angst and, yes, AIDS—is world-class theater music, an era's diary of yearning.

The Finn Festival: "In Trousers" and "Falsettos"

When: Through April 17

Where: Theatre Building Chicago, 1225 W. Belmont Ave.

Running time: "In Trousers," 1