

Tender Remembrances

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Songs from William Finn's life make for a poignant time with Arizona Onstage

by [James Reel](#)



Elegies--Looking Up

presented by Arizona Onstage Productions

8 p.m., Friday and Saturday, Nov. 17 and 18; 2 and 6 p.m., Sunday, Nov. 19

ZUZI's Theater

738 N. Fifth Ave.

\$22 general, \$18 students and seniors

270-3332; www.arizonaonstage.org

Arizona Onstage Productions

When Arizona Onstage Productions presents a William Finn show, you should know by now that you're not in for a feel-good musical. Yet neither is it an evening of cynicism and angst. Finn tends to write about extremely ordinary people, just like you and me, who struggle through very real problems of life and death; those who survive emerge battered but, in many ways, stronger. And so does Finn's audience.

Last weekend, Arizona Onstage Productions opened Finn's *Elegies--Looking Up*. You might expect this to be the most emotionally distant of Finn's efforts, because it isn't really a show with a plot and a stable cast of characters. Rather, it's a song cycle performed by five singers and a pianist. Yet this is perhaps the most moving example of Finn's work the company has yet produced (in past seasons, it did smashing versions of *Falsettoland* and *A New Brain*); although, more explicitly than ever, these songs are about Finn and his circle. Because there's no overall storyline, it's easier to bring these people into our own lives.

Elegies is, as the title makes clear, a series of songs reacting to the loss of people dear to us. (One song, actually, is about a series of dead family dogs; yes, there is welcome and appropriate humor in this show.) Yet it is not a series of dirges; quite the opposite. There are a couple of ballads, but most of the items are reasonably upbeat--and that's the key to what Finn is doing here. Each song is a tender remembrance of people lost to us, and yet each song is a celebration of the joy and love those people gave us.

In director Kevin Johnson's superb five-member cast (**neatly accompanied by tireless pianist Aryo Wicaksono for the entire duration of 2 hours non-stop**), no one expresses the tenuous emotional equilibrium of these songs better than Kit Runge. He is Finn's direct stand-in, and first appears in a recollection of a Thanksgiving potluck attended in the 1980s by a bunch of Finn's male (and predominantly gay) friends. Runge begins the song, as the lyrics demand, with great humor and affection, describing the men around the table. Eventually, he reveals that some of them, including the dinner's mastermind, died in the next few years, and he does so in a way that almost but not quite chokes him up, always putting across the story with fondness and affection. It's a very delicate emotional balance, and he maintains it here and later with such restraint that it's much more deeply moving than had the delivery been more heart-on-sleeve.

The point is that each song is a detailed narrative that is fully acted. I don't mean that there's interaction between the singers or pantomime and business with props. No, the singers tend to hold a mark on stage, but

they are living each song and its backstory within them as they perform, and the effect is always very real and sometimes unbearably touching. Johnson has done a tremendous job of drawing this out of his uniformly talented cast.

Besides Runge, there's Betty Craig, one of whose high points is an anthem that will ring true with every uncompromising old schoolteacher in the audience. There's Marcus Terrell Smith, who sets the tone at the top of the show with a jaunty and yet tender remembrance of some long-gone Korean shopowners who years before had befriended him and fed him from "a bowl filled with luck and self-control." (Finn, as lyricist, has a gift for imagery that is arresting but never goes over the top.)

Diane Thomas delivers quite a range of material with aplomb, from a frisky remembrance of a childhood Passover meal to the farewell of a dying mother to her children (a song that, miraculously, is not at all maudlin; in fact, it's inspiring). Joseph Topmiller spends much of the evening as a backup singer, but he, too, has his high points, including the lively, funny song about the dogs.

Frankly, Finn displays no particular melodic gift, but like classical composer Leos Janáček, he expertly patterns his material after natural speech rhythms. The lyrics drive the songs, and when Finn occasionally repeats a line, he sometimes alters the meaning of each iteration by subtly accenting a different word. There are times when Finn gives up on lyrics entirely, and has his singers fall into vocalise and scat; when Runge takes on such passages, it's as if the memories are too heartbreaking to describe in words, and yet the music is there to carry him forward.

Director Johnson's theatrical instincts won't allow this to devolve into some sort of piano-bar presentation. The set is dressed elegantly; its reds and blacks initially suggest a combination of mortuary and bordello, but before long, its juxtaposition of dignity (the black) and life (the red) seems a perfect backdrop to the songs. Zachary Ciaburri's lighting design seems to have a different cue every few bars of music, but it's carefully keyed to each song's emotional currents and never seems over-busy. The singers are very subtly amplified, which saves them from having to belt; Thomas' microphone was unreliable on opening night, but when the technician occasionally cut it back, Thomas proved not to need it anyway.

Arizona Onstage's *Elegies* is by no means feel-good theater, but ultimately it is a sincere and loving comfort.