Labored effort lacks humanity

By Margaret Quamme
FOR THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Working is a doggedly well-intentioned musical, with moments of wit and emotion, and long stretches of preachiness.

The Ohio State University production of the two-act by Stephen Schwartz and Nina Paso uses a 1999 update of the 1978 musical.

With songs by six composers, the production suffers from a committee approach.

The lack of plot also hurts: Working: The Musical is based on the 1974 best-seller for which Studs Terkel interviewed Americans about their work lives. Some stories are condensed and presented as monologues.

In the musical, these characters are reduced to stereotypes: an uptight third-grade teacher (V. Ryan Creameans) who doesn't appreciate cultural diversity, a condescending socialite (Angela Henderson), an unscrupulous executive (Will Burress).

At the other end are noble blue-collar workers: a selfless firefighter (Bill Gordon), a beleaguered millworker (Adrian Helser), an honest stonemason (Matthew McIntire).

Sometimes their songs transcend their situations: James Taylor's Millwork is powerful and moving. Yet, more often, the songs are generic and repetitious.

The most intriguing characters (some actors play multiple roles) are the few who break out. Gordon shows gusto as a parcel deliveryman with strong opinions about dogs and sunbathers. In one of the few scenes that allow character interaction, Ashlee Mundy, Megan Corbin and Malerie Tabern raucously compare notes on their telephone jobs.

Meredith Lark, as self-assured waitress Delores, runs away with the single true showstopper, It's an Art.

Most of the time, only one person is speaking. So director Christopher Roche must find something for others in the huge cast to do: They either perform pantomimes (scrubbing the floor during a song about cleaning, for example) or sit, gazing upward, and listen to whichever singer or speaker is taking center stage.

Sarah Sugarbaker's set is a gray subway station, dominated by huge turning cogs and gears. This might work symbolically, but, on a literal level, it doesn't make sense.

While he might have had an agenda for his book, Terkel allowed his interviewees to emerge as quirky individuals. By flattening them into types, the musical denies their humanity.

Columbus Dispatch review of Working.

Written by: Margaret Quamme
Musical tames Terkel’s left-leaning views

BY RICHARD ADES

Anyone who’s familiar with Studs Terkel would be surprised at what an uncontroversial musical has been made out of Working, his 1974 book about Americans and their jobs.

Working: A Musical is pleasant enough, but it’s far less confrontational than, for example, the radio talk show Terkel produced for years in Chicago. Terkel was an aggressive interviewer who was not shy about pushing his left-of-center viewpoint.

Here, the most controversial idea is that teachers sometimes harbor ethnic prejudices. It’s not the kind of effort that got Terkel blacklisted during the McCarthy era.

Maybe the musical has mellowed with age. Nina Faso and composer/lyricist Stephen Schwartz (Wicked) adapted Working for the stage in 1978, only four years after it was published. Like the book, the musical allows ordinary people to talk about their ordinary jobs, in line with Terkel’s belief that you don’t have to be a captain of industry to be worthy of attention. But while this might have seemed like the stance of a working-class activist in the ’70s, it shouldn’t raise many eyebrows in the Age of Blog.

In Ohio State’s production, several of these ordinary people reward our attention, thanks to a combination of interesting stories and feisty performances.

One of the most compelling takes is told by Tom Patrick (played by Bill Gordon), a cop who switched to firefighting after nearly shooting a man he thought was reaching for a gun. (It turned out the man was only snapping up after being caught getting a hand job from his girlfriend.) Also compelling are the comments of stone mason Anthony Coelho (Matthew McIntire), who takes pride in his job because he knows he’s producing something that could last for centuries.

The most controversial idea is that teachers sometimes hold ethnic prejudices. It’s not the kind of effort that got Terkel blacklisted during the McCarthy era.

Factory worker Grace Clements (Adrian Heiser) also stands out, if only because she sings “Millworker,” the musical’s most memorable tune. In fact, it’s been recorded by several artists, including James Taylor, who wrote it.

Other songs, which were written by Schwartz and others, may get viewers’ toes tapping, but they never rise above the level of bland competence. Perhaps the blanest is “Just a Housewife,” a Sondheim-like lament about the occupation that produces neither a paycheck nor, in many cases, much respect.

At least the singers do a good job on most of the tunes. Just as impressive is the five-piece band that backs them up from a prominent onstage position.

Director Christopher M. Roche gives the musical a lively production that makes the most of its huge cast. Sarah Sugarbaker’s multi-level set allows many of those cast members to remain onstage through much of the show so that they can simply hang around and listen while other characters are telling their stories.

Though those stories are seldom startling—and though they were probably more interesting before they were condensed from Terkel’s original collection of oral histories—they’re often worth the viewers’ attention as well.

INFORMATION
The Ohio State University Department of Theatre will present Working: A Musical at 7:30 p.m. today and Friday in Thayer Theatre at the Deeds Performance Center, 1649 University Drive. Tickets are $26-$37 for senior citizens and OSU faculty, staff, and Alumni Association members; $15 for students. 614-292-2295.

Columbus’ The Other Paper review of Working.

Written by: Richard Ades