

Dancing strong but lyrics are weak in 'Rocco's Tune'

By: TRACY CUMMINGS - For the North County Times

The latest show in Oceanside is "Rocco's Tune," a new musical comedy by Andrea L. Bearden-Kuhns and R.A. Woodruff. Loosely based on the Song of Solomon in the Bible, it is a love story that highlights the contrasts of our society.

Elizabeth is a librarian who naively believes the two goons who tell her she is going to a screen test for Paramount Studios. No such thing is going to happen. The goons actually kidnap Elizabeth to be the new member of Rocco's harem. Rocco, played with smooth confidence by Hans Gieseke, is a powerful underworld boss who is worshipped by the women he keeps. They sing his praises, but Elizabeth's arrival makes them question whether they want to continue living in the harem. Each sings about becoming an "Ordinary Dame."

No matter how many diamonds and dresses Rocco gives Elizabeth, she remains true to her love,

John. He runs a soup kitchen on skid row, and his concern for his fellow man has captured her heart. Elizabeth (Shelby Jennings) convinces Rocco he can't convert her to the rich life, and he frees her.

The production has spared no expense. Linda McGee costumes the actors in fancy clothes and jewels. Set designers Jason Dino and Andy Pierce use faux marble to create a penthouse. Scene changes are long, but the pace picks up when dancers are onstage.

Choreographer Tiffany Billings has outdone herself. Whether dancers are leaping on tables or evoking ominous sexuality, they are the best part of "Rocco's Tune." **Most noteworthy are dancers William Lu and Travis Ruggirello.**

The familiar theme "Rocco's Tune" touches on is undermined by the gift Rocco makes of his money: Crime doesn't pay, but a soup kitchen will take his cash. The show's contrasts -

--- virginity versus prostitution, wealth versus poverty ---- should give the musical a gritty realism, but director Al Valletta hasn't yet elicited grounded performances from the actors, with the exception of Gieseke. Others could follow Gieseke's lead and show confidence by embodying their roles more deeply.

Jennings' voice is lovely, as are many of the singers', like Anthony Giovino, but it's difficult to make up for the strained rhymes in the lyrics.

The show's splendid dancing mixed with its uneven lyrics is disturbing at times.

"Rocco's Tune" is a benefit for Bread of Life Mission's homeless winter shelter in Oceanside. We don't even have to be mobsters to help this worthy cause.

"Rocco's Tune" runs two hours with a 20-minute intermission.