



** *GO! and Critic's Pick* ***

SAVIN' UP FOR SATURDAY NIGHT A thunder 'n' lightnin' romance between ex-spouses crackling around a restraining order lies in the vain heart of *Savin' Up for Saturday Night*, Jeff Goode (book) and Richard Levinson's (songs) new musical set in an undisclosed locale that sounds a whole lot like West Texas. And though this is a countrified variation on Erin Kamler's urban and urbane *Divorce! The Musical*, which played at the Coast Playhouse earlier this year, director Jeremy Aldridge does double duty to seduce us into an environment, as he did with last year's hit at this same theater, *Louis & Keely, Live at the Sahara*. David Knutson's set transforms the theater into small-town canteen/gas station, with plastic L.P. records and American flags pinned to the wall. Jaimie Froemming's Texas costumes can make you feel a tad out of place for leaving that shirt with the fringe and the cowboy boots in the closet. And there are other striking similarities between *Savin' Up* and *Louis & Keely*: a marriage on the rocks, an onstage band (honky-tonk rather than jazz, consisting of musical director/guitarist John Groover McDuffie, who's also on pedal steel; Peter Freiberger on bass; Dave Fraser on piano; John Palmer on drums; and Al Bonhomme, alternating on guitar). Levinson's songs are a throwback to early Elton John, when he was working with Bernie Taupin, with a twist of Randy Newman's harmonic grandeur. Each of the two acts opens with a ballad accompanied only by piano ("Dr. Bartender" and "Small Town"), which have simple yet haunting harmonic progressions from John's earliest albums, and the shit-kicking Act 2 "Gotta Lotta Rockin' To Do" is a musical nod to John's "Saturday Night's Alright (For Fighting)." Also echoing *Louis & Keely* is a dimension that makes this show just right for L.A. — a prevalent tension between narcissism and the capacity to give of oneself, which is perfectly embodied in the delusions of Eldridge Jr. (Brendan Hunt), a local homophobe who believes he possesses the charisma and style of Elvis Presley. In fact, he has a slight speech impediment and a deranged glint in his eye. His singing act dominates the bar, with his name in lights as a backdrop. (A number of the bulbs tellingly need replacing, like in his own emotional circuitry.) Can he win back his ex, Lucinda (the vivacious Natascha Corrigan) — a woman of machine-gun wit and fury, who works double time to penetrate the impenetrable veneer of Eldridge's ego? Things get touchy when Eldridge's longtime friend, bartender Doc (the bearlike Bryan Krasner) finally has the guts to make a move on Lucinda, while sweet Patsy (Courtney DeCosky) cares for Eldridge — but not that much. *Savin' Up* is a thin entertainment, enhanced by Allison Bibicoff's sashaying choreography, but an entertainment nonetheless. Its tone of sentimentality sprinkled with metaphysics is embodied in the song "Here," beautifully rendered by Rachel Howe as Sissy, a daffy waitress. The place and people can make you so insane, you want to flee, she croons: "And I know someday/We're all just gonna disappear/So I want to take the time right now to say/I really love it here." Sacred Fools Theatre, 660 N. Heliotrope Drive, L.A.; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., Oct. 4 & 11, 7 p.m.; through October 24. (310) 281-8337. (Steven Leigh Morris)