

'Kingdom's' a rough-cut gem

"Only a Kingdom" at New England Hall, Boston, through Sunday.

Judith Steir's new musical, "Only a Kingdom," is about the love affair between King Edward VIII of England and the American divorcee Wallis Simpson, so its outcome is no surprise. But there are enough ingredients for an engrossing evening of theater. The strengths of its premiere production, billed as a work in progress, are Steir's sympathetic insights into the central characters and several lovely melodies in the score.

Steir chose first-rate collaborators — Peter Mansfield, the arranger and conductor of the music, choreographer Donald Saddler and Gina Fiore, who coached the singers — to work with the cast and orchestra of students from the Boston Conservatory of Music. The choral blend of the students' voices is studded with several stand-out performances.

The show begins with the couple's first meeting, while Simpson is still married, and ends with their wedding several years later, after the king has given up his

throne to become the Duke of Windsor. A triptych of background screens sets the period with newsreel footage and places the specific scenes.

Under Michael Allosso's direction, the love story and its resolution are portrayed with dignity as decisive acts by a monarch who knew he was ill-suited for his job. Simpson's motivations are less clear, but in the voice and person of Noelle J. Kenney, she is the most appealing figure in the show. Andrew D. Sarich as Windsor grows into his role.

Comic relief comes in the form of a chorus of town gossips who deliver the news and the dirt. Allosso has directed their broadsides in comic-book style that is oddly jolting and mostly tasteless. Making Elsa Maxwell into a bawdy hostess serves only to annoy, despite the good-natured foolery of Cristie Geist in the role. Chad Kimball delivers an eerie re-creation of Winston Churchill as an ally of the king.

Steir has bravely taken on the issue of the royal family's Nazi leanings, but she has undercut its

significance by trusting it to the gossips. A revision of the simplistic lyrics and another draft of the script to layer in more shades of darkness could propel the project beyond Boston.

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