

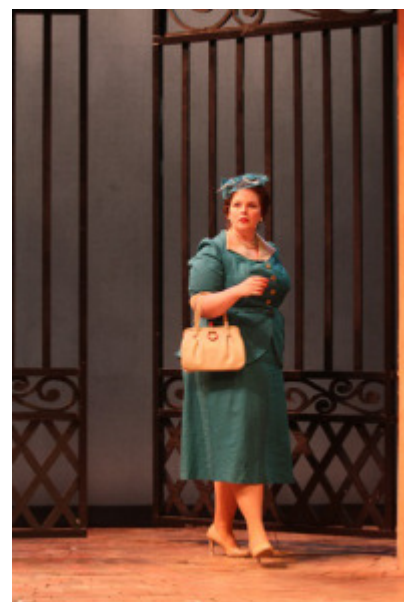
# NealsPaper

All Things Entertaining and Cultural

## The Light in the Piazza — Villanova Theatre

Adam Guettel enjoys a unique distinction among the current class of musical theater composers. While Redgraves and Fondas have responded to the generational lure of acting, and various fathers and sons have illustrated the passing on of baseball talent, Guettel is alone in being a third-generation songwriter for Broadway. His grandfather is my choice for the best ever, Richard Rodgers. His mother, Mary Rodgers, wrote the music for "Once Upon a Mattress." Guettel trumps his elders by writing both lyrics and music.

His score for his 2005 musical, "The Light in the Piazza," written with librettist Craig Lucas, is among the best works of this century and even the last 40 years. Sumptuous and evocative while being witty and capturing the Italian flavor of its Florence (Firenze) setting, Guettel's elegant compositions entertain and provide dramatic singers of a multi-octave range both a challenge and an opportunity to shine.



Lucas's book is also excellent. I place "The Light in the Piazza" among 21st century highlights and regard it as a better, more complete, more lasting work than "Monty Python's Spamalot," which was given the 2005 Tony for Best Musical. The first time I saw it I was enchanted, and I remain a fan whenever I encounter it.

Villanova Theatre ends a rather impressive year in which every one of its show was commendable and recommendable with an estimable "Light in the Piazza" that may not soar as brightly as the Broadway original or the 2009 Philadelphia Theatre Company production that boasted a memorable turn by Matthew Scott as Fabrizio but that brings out the beauty in Guettel and Lucas's piece and compels you to root for the happiest of endings for the young lovers, Clara and Fabrizio, no matter the objections or obstacles they face.

Please understand me. I have no intention of demeaning Valerie Joyce's staging of "The Light in the Piazza" at Villanova. When I say it "doesn't soar," it's because Joyce's rendition is plainer, and its characters simpler, than in the grander productions at Lincoln Center and the PTC. Joyce opts to use Villanova's more intimate space for a more intimate production. The characters seem comparatively ordinary and workaday. Joyce assigns them a middle class, conventional approach to life, and endows Clara's mother, Margaret, with a pronouncedly skeptical, almost puritanical, attitude towards the romance that develops between Clara and Fabrizio, a liaison that would be lauded and cherished if Margaret did not harbor a secret she never quite finds the opportunity to reveal. Margaret seems more on guard as a

moralist than on tenterhooks as a woman trying to prevent what she views as a calamity. Making the characters more average than worldly in sensibility takes away some of the inherent glamor and sweep of the Firenze Guettel and Lucas introduce. It replaces them with another quality that may, upon consideration, lead to greater general identification with Margaret, her values, and her fears.

Amy Acchione Myers plays Margaret as a steely, cautious, suspicious woman who nonetheless has a difficult time trying to stop a deepening relationship she knows might have a sad, potentially devastating ending. Myers is sharp with Fabrizio, a Florentine who is attracted on sight to Clara, when he and Clara first meet. She takes a strict motherly approach that scolds and seems angry and unfriendly instead of being regrettably realistic about having to nip young and spirited ardor in the bud. The choice is legitimate. As it plays out, you realize Lucas's book supports what Myers is doing. Open disdain rather than tact with Fabrizio just makes Margaret come across as less cosmopolitan or gracious than her past travels, American Southern background, and wealth would suggest. She registers as an intelligent, but not particularly cultured, woman from Winston-Salem, North Carolina on a tourist's jaunt to a Tuscan city she remembers from her honeymoon rather than someone who will appreciate the finer points of Italian congeniality and embrace an adventure willingly. Going back to her initial behavior toward Fabrizio, Myers eyes him disapprovingly and treats him roughly, as if he was a lout bothering her daughter instead of the sweet, thoughtful, ingenuous youth Peter Andrew Danzig's portrayal consistently brings to the stage. A more subtle approach might be preferred, such as Myers playing Margaret as a mother who must discourage any suitor to her daughter, even one she dismisses reluctantly, because she is aware of an impediment to the happiness Guettel has Fabrizio so frequently express in song.

None of Myers's or Joyce's choices are wrong or damaging to "Piazza." They merely cast Margaret as a woman who is deliberately withholding instead of empathetic to Clara and Fabrizio's feelings but forced to act in a way she believes will ward off trouble or misery down the road. Myers's options change the tone of "Piazza." They harden Margaret and make her seem conventional. The truth is she may be conventional, but I found Margaret difficult to like in the first act, even in scenes when she comes to Clara's aid, because of her rude, hurtful way of dealing with Fabrizio, as if he was the town scamp who wasn't good enough for Clara rather than a nice young man whose long-term satisfaction and joy with Clara is a worrying maternal concern.

In some ways, I might be reacting to a reality I should admire. It is plausible that Margaret, a wealthy woman but from a relatively small city, would be a bit of a hawk who would be suspicious of any young man who courted Clara, even if he was a member of the right North Carolina country club and encouraged Clara, deficiencies and all, to join the Junior League.

That same "reality" affects Joyce's presentation of Florence and of Fabrizio's family, the Nacarellis, as well. Though silhouette projections of The Duomo, Michelangelo's statue of David (although not in any way in which it's actually displayed in Florence), the Signoria, and other sites suggest Florence, it, like Margaret, seems workaday, a typical city where people go about their business, take their evening strolls, or passeggiatas, and approach life in a routine fashion. The overwhelming loveliness of the city is subjugated to its being a place the people in the story, e.g. the Naccarellis, happen to live.

Again, this can make sense. Signor Nacarelli, Fabrizio's father, owns a tie shop on the Piazza della Repubblica, one of Florence's main squares and tourist destinations. He probably makes a handsome living without being rich or fancy. Seeing the simplicity of this logic on stage, though, again makes the characters seem ordinary instead of people who stand out and command attention amid the Florentine bustle.

And what's wrong with that? Aren't most of us ordinary and everyday, at least as seen from the

perspective of others? I emphasize again Joyce did nothing wrong in making the Nacarellis' world and Margaret's vacation so middle-of-the-road. She's probably more accurate about them than directors who endow them with a special luster, but her choices bring down the overall tone of the musical, "The Light in the Piazza" a notch. It became less majestic, less sunlit, and less romantically magical. For me, that took some getting used to. I saw innocence and naivete where I was accustomed to seeing sophistication and polish. For audiences encountering "The Light in the Piazza" for the first time, I think entrance to the Nacarellis' milieu will be easier, especially since Paul Weagraff, who plays Signor Nacarelli conveys charm and an old-world ease that leavens Joyce's first act.

The second act plays more smoothly and more involvingly because Lucas's story takes a strong hold, Margaret is more resigned to the relationship between Clara and Fabrizio, the plot becomes more dramatic and affecting, and you, the audience, intensely want matters to work out for the characters, particularly Clara and Fabrizio, as much as they do.

In the long run, Joyce's production of "The Light in the Piazza" for Villanova is satisfying and fulfills the warmth and romance with which Lucas and Guettel, not to mention the author of the original novella, Elizabeth Spencer, endow it.

Margaret Johnson brings her daughter, Clara, to Florence to take a respite from Winston-Salem, where her marriage to Clara's father, Roy, is on the rocks, and to give both her and Clara a change of scene in a city that combines history and beauty and is also the place where Margaret and Roy spent a promising honeymoon almost 30 years earlier.

Clara is not the most manageable companion. Childlike at the age of 26, she is always wandering away from Margaret to examine monuments and sculptures on her own. She is especially fond of naked male figures whose genitals are visible and in one of Guettel's lyrics refers to Italy as the "land of naked marble boys" such as she never saw in Winston-Salem.

Clara is curious and gregarious. While Margaret tries to interest her in the various sights to be found in the courtyard of the Signoria, Clara is more likely to flit from the spot where Savonarola was burned at the stake to run up to people and say hello and be sociable. As she flits, her running and the breeze off the nearby Arno keep causing her wide-brimmed straw hat, decorated with a pale blue scarf tied around the crown, to fall off of her head. After one of the gusts, Clara chases the hat which floats in the Florentine air (via a neat production effect) towards Fabrizio, who catches it and hands it back to Clara with a smile and a bow. Fabrizio has been watching Clara from a distance, already attracted to her and already fascinated by her penchant of meandering in spurts all around the historic piazza. He is infatuated by the time he has the opportunity to be chivalrous and retrieve Clara's hat from mid-air. Clara, in turn, is dazzled by Fabrizio's friendliness and polite, forward yet bashful, behavior. She is a woman who has been kept from any relationship with boys for reasons Margaret can explain. Therefore she has no experience with young men, and Fabrizio's attentiveness charms and delights her. She wants to accept his invitation, also extended to Margaret, to join him at a café for some espresso.

Margaret, on the other hand, is upset by the obvious glow Clara and Fabrizio assume when gazing at each other. In no uncertain terms, she refuses his invitation to go for refreshments and works to discourage and get rid of him, as if he was an impertinent flirt who was using Continental confidence to beguile an innocent young American tourist.

Fabrizio is hurt, but he is smitten and unflappable. Clara is his quest, and he will pursue her. He goes to the tie store to ask for his father's and married brother's advice. He serenades the Florentine piazza declaring, "Il Mondo Era Vuoto," a song Guettel wrote in English as "The World Was Empty" and had

translated to Italian by the wonderful musical theater actress Judy Blazer. Danzig is plaintive and sincere as he sings how Clara has arrived to fill his life and rescue him from a solitary existence he just realized was his lot. His Fabrizio is determined to make his world complete and content by having Clara share it. He calls her “la luce nella piazza,” the light in the piazza, and “mio cor,” my heart, and says he will never be lonely again and that he will work to turn from a boy to man to be worthy of Clara.

Margaret is shaken by Fabrizio’s appearance and even more by Clara’s reaction to a young man she says she cannot live without. The “wanting something” and “reaching for it” Clara sings about in “The Beauty Is” has come to pass, but Margaret seeks to prevent any escalation of the Clara-Fabrizio attraction.

Fabrizio will have none of Margaret’s evasion. He follows Clara everywhere and takes her on a walk, a passeggiata, an evening pastime of Italians in most major cities. He also follow them to a church where, in the midst of getting the cold shoulder from Margaret, Fabrizio spots his father ending a conversation with a priest and immediately brings him to meet the Johnsons. Signor Nacarelli knows of Fabrizio’s ardor towards Clara and invites the Johnsons to his home to meet his family. Margaret wants to decline the offer of hospitality but then thinks maybe a meeting with the Nacarellis in their home will give her the chance to explain Clara’s condition to Fabrizio’s parents and accepts.

Complications, including Margaret never getting the opportunity to corral the Nacarellis into a serious conversation, Fabrizio and Clara falling ever more genuinely in love, and Margaret weighing the young people’s happiness against her fears, are the primary business early in “The Light in the Piazza’s” second act. Lucas’s script keeps things on edge and tenuous. Guettel provides an amusing look at the personalities in the Nacarelli home with the number “Aiuto me,” in which an unnerved Fabrizio asks for help when he thinks he has lost Clara to Margaret’s spite, and even more entertaining in which Gerri Weagraff, as Signora Nacarelli admits that she loves when her home is in uproar and she can stir the different emotions of her husband, sons, and daughter-in-law to a fever pitch she, as Mama, can then ameliorate.

The second act also features the lovely duet between Margaret and Signor Nacarelli, “Let’s Walk,” a bravado dramatic moment for Clara, and three engaging statement songs from Clara, Fabrizio, and Margaret in turn.

The Villanova production gains strength as “The Light in the Piazza” proceeds. The complexities of the second act also individualize the characters and make all of them better understood. Margaret, in particular, goes through a major transition, partially because she realizes Clara’s ecstasy in being with Fabrizio, partially because she knows her own marriage has reached a point when love and romance have evaporated, when she and Roy will have to face the “Dividing Day” she sings about in the first act.

Dramatic tension in the second act, caused mostly by the machinations of Fabrizio’s family, gives Joyce’s production a more palpable drive. More situations are presented for consideration, and the Johnsons and Nacarellis don’t have to be categorized as ordinary or special, mundane or sophisticated. They are characters going through honest dilemmas, and we are engaged by their problems and the possible solutions. Margaret graduates to being a person who demonstrates nobility and deserves empathy. Signor Nacarelli shows how one reality that seems to cloud a situation can be replaced by a more powerful reality and causes one to bend and honor the more expansive, more joyful course instead of clinging stubbornly to tradition or prejudice. Joyce’s production takes on a cohesion it was missing. Scenes blend easily one into the other, and each is crammed with complications and consequences. “The Light in the Piazza” acquires its customary glow and elegance. You leave Villanova’s Vasey Theatre gratified and feeling fortunate for having seen Guettel’s rarely produced gem again.

Whatever attitude or stance Amy Acchione Myers chooses for Margaret, she plays it well and with consistency. Myers is especially good when Margaret has relented in her resistance to Clara and Fabrizio's romance and is in a quandary about what to do about so much blossoming love and her obligation to inform the elder Nacarellis of Clara's limitations and how they may manifest themselves when she is a wife or mother.

Her Margaret takes on texture in the scene in which she witnesses Fabrizio's sister-in-law, Franca, being bitter over her husband, Giuseppe's philandering, and in the sequence when she goes on impulse to the tie shop to level with Signor Nacarelli and becomes better acquainted with him in "Let's Walk." By the end, Myers has won admiration as Margaret, not the least for her lovely voice and affecting handling of "Dividing Day," the reprise of "The Beauty Is," and her eleven o'clock number, "Fable."

Christine Petrini is a winsome Clara. Until you understand Clara's malady, it may seem that Petrini is annoyingly restless and peripatetic, always rambling around the stage and behaving in a way that seems both overfriendly and overwrought. Once you know Clara's situation, you appreciate how well Petrini illustrated it and give her credit for some cleverness in her portrayal.

Petrini's greatest virtue is how much she conveys Clara's love for Fabrizio. You can tell Clara's feeling are more than a first-time attraction to a specific boy who requites her attention. Petrini lets you see Clara's love and regard for Fabrizio. Like Myers, Petrini sings with meaning and shows an impressive range.

Peter Andrew Danzig is the most engaging performer of all as Fabrizio. As with Petrini, Danzig leaves no doubt that Fabrizio is passionately in love with Clara and not having a schoolboy crush or springtime infatuation. While Myers and Petrini sing beautifully, Danzig sings with conviction, with emotion that underscores all Fabrizio feels. Guettel's score includes several passages in Italian, and Danzig handles these with aplomb. He is a puerile Fabrizio who comes to emotional age once he notices Clara and restores her hat to her. Danzig makes you believe that Fabrizio did not realize what he lacked before he encountered Clara and that his world is no longer empty since he received a warm response from her.

Christen Mandracchia is a wry and entertaining Franca, who knows as well as Signora Nacarelli the buttons to push, the knobs to turn, and the passion to stir to get what she wants. Mandracchia is wonderful in the scene when Franca causes a commotion on purpose and one in which she jokes with Fabrizio in a way that triggers Clara's ire.

Paul Weagraff has an urbane air as Signor Nacarelli. Weagraff is especially good at finding small things for Signor Nacarelli to do when he is not the focus of a scene, e.g. going over papers while Fabrizio and Giuseppe spar.

Gerri Weagraff maximizes her best moment when Signora Nacarelli admits to being an inveterate instigator.

Two Villanova performers who have been in most productions this year, Seth Thomas Schmitt-Hall and John K. Baxter acquit themselves well as members of the chorus. Jim Hawkins has obvious fun in his role as the priest in the Nacarellis' parish. The "Piazza" ensemble has much music to perform, at times in the background, as individually and as a group, they do a fine job.

Rosemarie McKelvey's costume perfectly denote the characters in Lucas and Guettel's play. I especially like the '50s dresses chosen for Margaret and the red dress selected for Franca. David P. Gordon's set served the various uses needed. His silhouettes made for a handsome background.

"The Light in the Piazza" runs through Sunday, April 13, at Villanova University's Vasey Theatre,

Lancaster and Ithan Avenues, in Villanova, Pa. Showtimes are 8 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday. Tickets range from \$25 to \$21 and can be ordered by calling 610-519-7474 or going online to [www.villanovatheatre.org](http://www.villanovatheatre.org).

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