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Entertainment

Romantic 'Light in Piazza' shines at Villanova

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By Ellen Wilson Dilks

Villanova Theatre tops off their current season with a production of the musical "The Light In The Piazza," with a book by Craig Lucas and music and lyrics by Adam Guettel (who happens to be Richard Rodgers grandson). Based on a 1953 novella by Elizabeth Spencer, the production runs on the Vasey stage to April 13 under the direction of Dr. Valerie Joyce, Ph. D., who also serves as choreographer.

Originally work shopped at the Intiman Playhouse in Seattle in 2003, "The Light In The Piazza" moved to Chicago's Goodman Theatre in 2004, and then to Lincoln Center in 2005, where it won six Tony Awards. Set in the 1950s, the plot deals with a summer spent in Italy by wealthy Southerner, Margaret Johnson (Amy Acchione Myers), and her emotionally stunted daughter, Clara (Christine Petrini). At first one thinks that Margaret is what we would now call a "helicopter mom," sheltering her daughter too much, but we eventually learn there is something genuinely wrong with Clara. Margaret is forced to re-evaluate her hopes for Clara's future when the girl falls in love with a young Italian named Fabrizio Nacarelli (Peter Andrew Danzig). A simple thing like a breeze carrying Clara's hat away sets events in motion.

As is the case with fiction, the couple fall in love instantly and Fabrizio pursues Clara all over Florence as Margaret tries to end the relationship. But even quickly taking the girl to Rome doesn't work. Fabrizio's tender care for Clara eventually wins Margaret over, and she phones her husband, Roy (Seth Martin, who nicely portrays the stern 1950s man of the house), back in America to inform him of the impending wedding. Fabrizio's parents (the deft and talented Paul & Gerri Weagraff) are initially all for the pair marrying—until Signor Nacarelli discovers Clara is six years older than his son. A happy ending finally ensues—or does it? One is left wondering if Fabrizio and Clara will be able to deal with her issues. Will she be able to handle life in Florence, or will she have to return to her mother? The story raises as many questions as it answers...

The cast is very strong, with lovely voices—and the piece is about 50 percent singing. As Margaret, Ms. Acchione Myers carries the lion's share. She handles the comedic aspects of the role wonderfully, but really shines in the emotional moments—showing us a mother whose actions are done out of tremendous love for her daughter. Ms. Petrini is lovely and very adept at conveying Clara's innocence (she is unaware of her limitations until late in the story), as well as her determination to have some independence. She never sinks into stereotype. Mr. Danzig matches her perfectly; his gives a strong but nuanced performance as a young man who is also genuinely innocent and caring, unlike his philandering brother Giuseppe (a nicely smarmy Mitchell Bloom). The love scenes between Clara and Fabrizio are played so sweetly, and so true—bringing older viewers back to their own first moments of young love.

Rounding out the speaking roles is a saucy Christen Mandracchia as Giuseppe's Sophia Loren-esque wife Franca. The ensemble, who supports the action as assorted residents of Florence and Rome, also serve as stage hands. This, thankfully, keeps the action flowing quickly from one locale to the next. They also add great vocals to the production; the troupe consists of John K. Baxter, Jim Hawkins, Allison Kim Hillard, Brendan Maxwell Farrell, Jill Jacobs, Allyce Morrissey, Sarah Ochocki, Emily Poworoznek, Seth Thomas Schmitt-Hall and Stephen Tornetta. Well done all.

Director Joyce keeps things nicely paced, yet gives her cast the tools to mine the comedy and explore the layers of complex emotions in the story. It is a very dense tale, which never gets treacherously fortunate. Lucas' script is solid, but some directors might miss the point and get too heavy-handed with it. Ms. Joyce avoids the pitfalls—and she's added some lovely choreography as

well. Musical direction was handled by Peter A. Hilliard, who elicits all of the correct emotions in each number. David P. Gordon's scenic design is well executed, serving the production perfectly. The viewer is deceived upon entering the theatre as only a black back wall with a large arch at stage center and two smaller arches on either side are all that is visible. Then one notices the swirled pattern of cobblestones on the stage floor that evokes the feeling of a piazza—as well as the two “balconies” above the two side arches. Throughout the piece, architectural elements slide in either at the center arch or in front of the sky blue wall behind it. It is simple, yet very effective. Also effective is Jerold R. Forsyth's lighting design, smoothly transitioning from the sunny piazza to the darkened interior of an ancient church, etc. Rosemarie McKelvey has provided lovely costumes that take one to the 1950s instantly, and John Stovicek has provided additional sound that nicely adds atmosphere. As there were no musicians visible, I thought the music was recorded; however the company acknowledged the orchestra at curtain call by pointing to the upstage wall. It's kind of a shame they couldn't take a bow, but the advantage of having the musicians hidden was their playing didn't overpower the singers as so often happens. The performers were miked, so there was no problem hearing them. I personally have issues with that—I feel it distorts the sound. Many times the actors did sound a bit “tinny,” which took me out of the moment. I wonder if there is an affordable sound system that would alleviate that problem—or is it the person controlling the levels on the body mikes?

Generally, I found the production well performed and emotionally engaging. As I said, it's not your typical toe-tapping musical; it challenges the viewer to think about several complicated issues. How much should parent shelter a child with challenges? When should you let them go? Can people really fall in love at first sight? Will it last? These were some of the things that went through my mind as I drove home. This is the kind of musical I like; check out “The Light In The Piazza” and let me know your impressions.

For reservations, call 610-519-7474 or visit www.villanovatheatre.org.

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