

timesunion

Review: 'Frankie and Johnny...' @ Bridge Street Theatre

By Steve Barnes
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Rita Rehn and Steven Patterson in "Frankie and Johnny in the Claire de Lune" at Bridge Street Theatre (BST publicity photo by John Sowle)

Catskill

It seems astonishing that "Frankie and Johnny in the Claire de Lune," Terrance McNally's celebration of sex and possible love between a pair of damaged members of the working poor, is now more than three decades old.

Aside from a few dated references and hallmarks of yesteryear like a wall phone, the two-character play, as performed in a new production that launches the 2018 season at Bridge Street Theatre, is both immediate and timeless. Under the direction of Sara Lampert Hoover, the production feels vibrant, raw and real, and it is by turns lusty and tender. In roars and whispers, it makes a plea for love being worth the risk no matter how much it's wounded you in the past.

"Everybody has scars," says Frankie (Rita Rehn). She's a diner waitress in her early 40s, and she's in her one-room walk-up in Manhattan's Hell's Kitchen neighborhood. (The excellent set is by Bridge Street co-founder John Sowle, as is the lighting.) Listening to Frankie, in one of the few times he's not motor-mouthing, is Johnny (Steven Patterson), a cook at the diner who's nearing 50. They'd had their first date earlier in the evening, and as the play opens they're finishing a noisy round of lovemaking. The scars, mentioned later, are physical and mental for each character; incurring them has had lasting effects on both.

Though in similar, lost places, they have opposite responses to past bad relationships: Frankie, her emotions so armored that her reflexive response is to reject romantic possibility, wants the evening to be no more than a satisfying carnal romp; Johnny, encouraged by their sexual connection and by discovered coincidences in their life stories, quickly starts talking about love, marriage, kids.

Patterson grabs the role with his teeth in ways I haven't seen Johnny portrayed before: Not just intense, this Johnny can be genuinely scary at times in his emotional forwardness and urgency, but Rehn makes Frankie an effective foil for him. She's tough, 20-some years after coming to New York and failing to make it as an actress. She wants and enjoys sex, but the rest -- this wild-eyed, Shakespeare-quoting cook who thinks an explosive coupling surely must lead to something more? For Frankie: No, thank you.

But he's persistent to the point of exasperation. Maybe, she thinks: Maybe. Dreams have died for both of them, many times. But romantic optimism finds root, even in this rocky, infertile soil. It's a testament to McNally's characters, and the open-hearted embrace given them by Hoover and her cast, that we want it flower again.