

**Frankie and Johnny in the Claire De Lune, by Terrence McNally.  
Directed by Sara Lampert Hoover. Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.**

**"This is better than anything in Shirley MacLaine."**



Rita Rehn and Steven Patterson; photo: John Sowle

Apart from some very specific references that place Terrence McNally's play "Frankie and Johnny in the Clair De Lune" in time, this is the most timeless piece of lovely romantic fluff produced by a major author in the latter half of the 20th century and a play always worth reviving and revisiting. At Bridge Street Theatre in Catskill, New York, a lovely couple of actors are giving this play everything it needs and a bit more into the bargain. Opening in darkness on a high-end sexual orgasm this play proceeds to expose the two people in the midst of the early stage of a love affair to one another, leaving no secret unexposed and no fear sheltered by a protective soul.

Short-order cook Johnny, divorced father of two, and waitress Frankie, single and abused are attracted to each other at work and finally spend an evening together in her apartment. In the hour after dawn, at the end of the two-hour play, they discover the secret to attraction is total honesty and a tacit agreement to accept each other's failings if they want to succeed in love. This is a moral tale with a lot of talk about things that moralists would never approve of or allow on the stage. But it is a story about love and lovers and leavers and the left behind. It is a play whose sole object is the freeing of the soul, the opening of the heart to the potential for wounding and wonders, the agreement between lovers to love without question and to obey their hearts no matter the cost.

At the helm here is director Sara Lampert Hoover who does a smart job moving her two characters around, through, over and away from the bed, an open couch-bed, that dominates the set designed by John Sowle. Hoover makes her company debut with this play and shows us that sex can be comedy and comedy can be romance while romance can be tragedy and the tragic elements can be the endearing ones. Practically a rondel, the play takes us from the highpoint of their sexual engagement to the highpoint of the human understanding of their relationship's values. Hoover makes their quarrels into amazing duets for the voice and the body, body language often dominating the pairing. Hoover has the excellent luck to have as her two players this company's principal player, Steven Patterson, and newcomer Rita Rehn, both excellent actors who share an enormous amount of on-stage chemistry.

Rehn is exquisite in her mood alterations and her less-than-delicate charms., She knows just how to ply the gruff moments when Frankie is on the defensive. When the McNally script calls for her to be a persuasive sex kitten, she plays those moments for much more than they

are worth. Her honesty in playing the role is largely responsible for the warmth felt for her character by everyone in the theater.

Patterson takes on the butch, egotistical man of humble-like mien as he has done in the past with equally complex characters. He shows us the soft side of Johnny, especially in those instances where his memory of home and childhood dominate in dictating his actions and decisions. He allows all of the humanity and humility of Johnny's character to emerge with the passions he feels. Johnny injured is a man of need who manages to accept help. He is also a man in command of a kitchen knife when it becomes necessary for him to commit to the murder of an omelet.

John Sowle's very realistic set and his romantic lighting work perfectly to illuminate the two characters and their struggle to understand not just each other but them themselves as well. Michelle Rogers costumes are character-perfect and the very important sound work has been designed to perfection by Carmen Borgia. A bit more street sound to keep us grounded in New York City in the 1980s would have been nice, but even without that the play seems to be set just right.

This attractive, well-played production gives the McNally treasure all the life it has any right to expect. The play, seen, leaves the impression of an everyman play set in everytime and in everyplace where two such folk might meet, fall in and out and into love with the ease of real people in real time in a real situation where nothing seems entirely real. The only conundrum about this play is why it isn't done more frequently.

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