

Words and Music

Observations and opinions essayed in pursuit of a sensibly cultured life.

Review by B. A. Nilsson

How They Did Love

ALL ROMANCES ARE POSSIBLE; any enduring outcome is unlikely. We work hard to stay united. We're given little in the way of helpful precedent. If communication is the most important tool (my experience says it is), then Terrence McNally's 1987 off-Broadway hit "Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune" is a two-hour master class in discovering our secret selves, delivered with discursive dialogue that's whip-crack smart.



Rita Rehn and Steven Patterson

Photo by John Sowle

As a one-set two-hander, it's a natural for a theater looking to economize without artistic compromise, but it requires a creative team that's as smart as the script. The stellar production at Catskill's Bridge Street Theatre puts two fabulous actors on a set (designed by John Sowle) just stylized enough to alert us from the start to expect touches of fantasy.

We're not merely observers of Frankie and Johnny. We're voyeurs, eavesdropping darkly on their cries of carnal passion (conducted to the strains of a Goldberg Variation). When the lights come up, Johnny (Steven Patterson) is laughing, laughing too much, to the discomfort of bedmate Frankie (Rita Rehn). The reason? It's a joke that sets the tone of the play, a joke that takes a conventional premise into a nicely surprising payoff.

And it helps define the relationship between these two at the start, a waitress and a short-order cook, hooking up after a none-too-successful night out in what Frankie decrees a one-night stand. We're in her small Hell's Kitchen apartment. It's late. Johnny doesn't want to leave.

McNally's dialogue takes us on a labyrinthine trip through the clash of desire starkly expressed with a more cautious version that wishes to retreat back to the cage where it normally lives. Eloquent Johnny is a dropout from Brooklyn Heights who keeps a volume of Shakespeare in his locker at work. Patterson's challenge not only is to inhabit this character with a credible ah, shucks-ishness, but also to roller-coaster him through the dizzying twists of his conversational logic.

And he's well matched by Rehn. Her Frankie is (and has to be) all resistance at the start: happy to have had the romp in bed, but schooled in the heartbreak that too often follows. His fervent attention makes her nervous: "You don't look – you *stare!*" she says. She wants him out of the apartment, but not necessarily out of her life, and Rehn skillfully conveys the ambivalence behind her responses.

The dynamics shift, of course. Johnny must recharge his eloquent relentlessness; Frankie, who doesn't want to lose him, needs to open up a bit. The dynamics are in the dialogue, but a whole world hides between the lines, hinted at by the elisions, the jokes, the seemingly random changes of subject. Although Johnny is the more demonstrative, both of them communicate volumes through body language and facial expression and the way they move their bodies in relation to one another.

This is where the hand of the director lurks. The chemistry of live theater is such that the contributions of director and actors should seamlessly overlap, but Sara Lampert Hoover – making her directorial debut at Bridge Street – brought an accomplished hand to the pacing and the look of the production, especially (I'm guessing) in enhancing the shifting power dynamic with subtle rearrangements of those pictures the actors create on stage.

Beyond the apartment window are other windows that Frankie confesses to having studied: one of them houses an old couple whom she's never seen utter a word; in another is a woman who regularly suffers physical abuse from the man she's with. "I would never hit you," Johnny insists, and we want to believe him, especially as he celebrates the sight of the moon showing itself between buildings. He forestalls one of Frankie's efforts to get rid of him by phoning a radio station and asking the announcer to play "the most beautiful piece of music" to honor the woman he insists he loves. Debussy's "Clair de lune" comes on the air, moonlight upon moonlight, underscoring the dreamlike nature of the play's first act.

"They have an air of knowing all is vain / And through the quiet moonlight their songs rise," reads the Verlaine poem that inspired Debussy's music, but the second act takes us out of the moonlight and into light-of-day revelations. But watch Frankie's face as this act progresses: there's a moment when Rehn's expression becomes marvelously open and accepting, yet there seemed not even a flicker of change – a heartbreakingly wonderful moment.

Let those revelations remain surprises for you. It's enough to say that the Debussy returns, proving the endurance of those moonlit dreams. This is a magical love story with enough comedy to remind us of the truth in this tale. And it's a terrific display of creative talent. Remaining performances are at 7:30 PM Thursday through Saturday, April 5-7 and 2 PM Sunday, April 8. Tickets are at clairdelune.brownpapertickets.com or 1-800-838-3006.

Frankie & Johnny in the Clair de Lune

By Terrence McNally

Directed by Sara Lampert Hoover

Bridge Street Theatre, Catskill, NY

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