

Theater Review: International romance abounds in Stageloft musical 'Piazza'

By Kevin T. Baldwin, Telegram & Gazette Reviewer

Posted at 10:25 AM

Updated at 10:36 AM

STURBRIDGE — Stageloft Repertory Theater presents a standout staging of the musical “The Light in the Piazza,” winner of six Tony Awards in 2005 including Best Original Score. The production, presented in collaboration with JEMS Theater Company, is on a very limited run but is one that contains a veritable “fountain” of local talent, making it well worth seeing.

Part orchestral, part operatic, but completely unique in its joie de vivre, the musical’s score by Adam Guettel is a perfectly sumptuous blend, a throwback to musicals of yesteryear, providing a dramatic and lavishly romantic mood for the musical’s 1950s Italy setting.

Written by Craig Lucas, and based on a novella by Elizabeth Spencer, the show takes place in Florence, where wealthy American tourist Margaret Johnson (Sally Holden) is on an extended summer vacation with her young (adult) daughter Clara (Kelly Letourneau).

Holden is a strong presence on stage as Margaret, a proud, wealthy Southerner who is overprotective of vibrant, enthusiastic young Clara as the duo tour the Tuscany countryside.

Holden is challenged vocally by the complex score, which occasionally is not well-suited to her vocal range. However, she offsets this obstacle by presenting Margaret as she deals with a powerfully complex range of emotions as the story unfurls.

Many of the characters they encounter speak or sing in either Italian or broken English. While the foreign dialogue may take some in the audience by surprise, under the insightful direction of John Leslie, no translation is required, allowing for many humorous moments.

To be fair, Margaret’s “helicopter parenting” is partly due to the fact that Clara suffered a traumatic accident as a young girl, yet now appears “normal” to many who meet her.

Lucas’ script handles the subject matter with great delicacy, especially given the era in which the story takes place. Margaret hides all information regarding Clara’s past accident from everyone she meets, and from Clara as well.

The incident has had longstanding repercussions, as it has left Clara, though now an adult, at times almost childlike.

Letourneau is absolutely exceptional in “Piazza”, playing Clara as overtly trusting, which, in a country rumored to be full of sexually aggressive (or even predatory) Lotharios, has left the more experienced and worldly Margaret so stressed that she is practically unhinged.

Clara, herself, does not help ease Margaret’s stress level, either, as Clara finds herself experiencing a multitude of physical and emotional “awakenings,” most consistent with those of a blossoming young woman.

So, when Clara’s hat flies off her head in a sudden breeze, it winds up in the hands of handsome young Fabrizio (Isaac Swanson) and, for Clara and Fabrizio, it is love at first sight.

Swanson has a nice voice, and, as Fabrizio, a semblance of naïveté, almost equaling that of Clara. He does a superior job emoting through the song “Il Mondo Era Vuoto” as Fabrizio pines for Clara.

However, he is otherwise fairly reserved in the part, as there was little chemistry in his scenes with Letourneau. There should have been a great sense of passion, full on “electricity” between the two but, as it was, while they complimented each other adequately, there was hardly even a spark.

You can almost hear Margaret’s heart fall as she sees the smitten couple. Fabrizio’s family, on the other hand, embrace, even celebrate, the instant coupling. As the Naccarelli family is introduced, the story really begins to take flight.

At the Duomo, Margaret and Clara meet Fabrizio’s father, Signor Naccarelli (Gary Swanson), who eases Margaret’s concerns, if only temporarily. They tour along above the Piazzale Michelangelo in Firenze, Florence, during the number “Passeggiata,” nicely sung by Clara and Fabrizio.

When the two women are invited to the Naccarelli home, they meet Signora Naccarelli (Elaine Crane), along with Fabrizio’s serial-philandering brother Giuseppe (James Lameroux) and Giuseppe’s emotionally scarred wife Franca (Christine Petkus).

Crane has some of the show’s funniest moments at the beginning of Act 2, during the number “Aiutami,” which has the Naccarelli family falling apart after Clara and Fabrizio are separated when Margaret takes Clara far away from him (after discovering the two in bed together).

Petkus is quite satisfying in the role of Franca, who warns Clara about love’s waning in marriage as she conveys in the gloomy musical number “The Joy You Feel.” Yet the Italian family is still thoroughly enchanted by the American girl who has entranced their 20-year-old son and welcomes their impending nuptials.

Margaret does eventually see how much Fabrizio loves Clara, and how much Clara loves him in return, but Margaret is unsure how to reveal Clara’s secret without hurting everyone involved.

More secrets are unveiled during the course of the show, but overall it is a fairly simplistic plot offered up by Lucas’ adaptation. It is the intricacies, and sometimes the eccentricities, of Guetta’s score that help to propel the plot along at a firm pace, keeping it both fluid and interesting. The score is well-executed by Music Director Leslie and his musicians.

Letourneau, as Clara, had probably the most emotionally moving song of the night as she languishes for her love, for all love, in the show's poignant title song, "The Light in the Piazza." Letourneau is an terrific force of nature on stage.

There is no choreography, but instead a fine use of stage and house space with the blocking by Leslie. Costumes were completely period-appropriate. While a middle section of the stage set was not much to look at full-on, its appearance was deceiving, as it became a multipurpose background used for many scenes and manipulated with precision by all members of the cast and supporting ensemble.

The show excels in exploring the difficult, complex but loving bonds that exist between mothers and daughters, husbands and wives, fathers and sons. The Stageloft production not only explores the light in the piazza but also the light that exists within one's self and the light that is our relationships with our loved ones.