



Theater

A sparkling 'Picasso' comes to life at Delaware Theatre Company

By RICK MULROONEY • The News Journal • December 7, 2008

Imagine, if you would, a chance meeting between two of the towering figures of the 20th century – the protean painter Pablo Picasso and the revolutionary physicist Albert Einstein – just before each was to make his indelible mark on the world as we know it.

That's the mostly fictitious – and entirely entertaining – premise of “Picasso at the Lapin Agile,” as conceived by the ever-ingenious comic mind of Steve Martin and now presented in a sparkling new production by Wilmington's Delaware Theatre Company.

The scene is the cabaret Au Lapin Agile (“The Nimble Rabbit”) which still operates today in the raffish Montmartre district of Paris.

It's October of 1904 and the 25-year-old Einstein – still laboring in the patent office by day and working on his Special Theory of Relativity at night – arrives for an evening rendezvous with a lady admirer.

Except, in Martin's wickedly witty fantasy, he's to meet her in another bar entirely, a circumstance Einstein shrugs off with the offhand explanation that, relatively, it's just as likely she'll turn up at the Lapin as anywhere else.

The next woman through the door, however, is the comely Suzanne, who's there hoping to run into Picasso, at 24 already a noted ladykiller and still in his Blue Period, three years short of producing “Les Femmes d'Alger,” the painting that would set the art world on its ear.

The always-quick-with-a-quip Martin – with the aid of director David Stradley – wears all this portentous history lightly, and what ensues is a delightful 90 minutes of verbal sparring.

The tone is broad, approaching vaudeville at times, and always self-consciously theatrical – early on, Freddy the bartender (Jeb Kreager) heads into the audience to consult a patron's program over a supposed mixup in the cast's order of appearance.

Amid the lightheartedness, though, the play addresses a range of universal concerns – the meaning of art, love, fame and even existence itself among them – all accentuated in the end by the arrival of “a visitor” (ably impersonated by Danny Bernardy), who turns out to be a third indelible 20th-century icon destined – for good or ill – to outshine the other two, at least in the popular mind.

In the title role, Caesar Samayoa nicely captures the swaggering spirit – and irresistible charm – of the randy young Picasso, and he’s well-matched by Matt Pfeiffer as the brilliant and essentially sweet-natured Einstein.

The supporting cast more than ably serve as foils for the two – as well as Martin’s laugh-a-minute style: Lee Ann Etzold as the lovely, sardonic barmaid Germaine, Nathan Holt in a plum role as an exuberant but spectacularly wrong-headed inventor, Karen Peakes as the seductive Suzanne (among others), Aaron Cromie as Picasso’s presciently perceptive art dealer and John Morrison as a not-so-gracefully aging boulevardier.

Eric Schaeffer’s stylized setting, fronted by a series of skewed frames, cleverly but unobtrusively reinforces the show’s theme, while Troy A. Martin-O’Shia’s lighting goes from quietly effective to suitably dazzling when called for at the evening’s (literally) cosmic climax.

Christopher Colucci’s sound design expertly punctuates director Stradley’s smooth, sure staging, for an evening studded with comic delights from start to finish.