

BWW Review:

FRANKIE AND JOHNNY IN THE CLAIR DE LUNE at Bakehouse Theatre



Reviewed by Barry Lenny, Thursday 10th October 2019.

STARC Productions is back at the Bakehouse with [Terrence McNally's](#) 1987 play, [Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune](#), with Tony Knight once again directing Marc Clement and Stefanie Rossi. This time, it is definitely an adults-only production.

Set in Frankie's Hell's Kitchen, Manhattan, one-room tenement apartment, the play opens with a naked couple in bed, engaged in rather noisy coitus. Strategically arranged bedclothes, and Stephen Dean's carefully planned lighting design, combine to cover any actual nudity, although the two do spend most of the evening in underwear, but that is no more revealing than anything one might see at the beach. Their physical congress concluded, we discover that they are Frances, known as Frankie, a restaurant waitress, and John, who prefers to be called Johnny, the new short-order cook.

With their casual encounter over, Frankie now wants him to leave, with a view to eating ice cream in front of the television, but he has other ideas, seeing more in this than a date and a one-night stand. Things get awkward, as his irresistible force meets her immovable object. He declares that he has fallen in love with her, even talking of having children. Not surprisingly, as they have only known one another for a few weeks and this was their first date, she does not believe a word of it, puts up her barriers, and backs away. Because of a past relationship she has enormous commitment issues. He won't take no for an answer, and she cannot bring herself to say yes.

Today, the 'me too' movement would probably have a lot to say about Johnny.

Music is a big and integral part of the production. After their initial activities, Johnny rings the radio station wondering what they had been listening to, to be told that it was Bach's Goldberg Variations and, having convinced the presenter to play "the most beautiful music ever written", we hear Debussy's Clair de Lune. Wagner's Ride of the Valkyries, the opening to Act 3 of Die Walküre (The Valkyrie), the second music drama in his four-part epic, Der Ring des Nibelungen, (The Ring of the Nibelung), also has an airing. Johnny uses the song, Frankie and Johnny, as a reason that they, being Frankie and Johnny, should become a couple. Considering how that song ended, though, this seems a rather poorly thought out move on his part. The moon, too, plays an important part.

Knight, Rossi, and Clement have created another fine piece of theatre, with strong characterisations from both performers and powerful and convincing interactions between their two characters. There is also that rarity, believable and consistent accents throughout. They bring a bleakness to the lives of these two flawed and damaged individuals, through their performances, both lonely, one desperate for a relationship, the other terrified of the prospect, both trying to connect, and with wit helping to break down barriers.

The full house on opening night applauded long and loud, and there was much appreciative discussion in the foyer after. Thirty years on, some views of the production have changed, but there is still much relevance in a society where many of us are becoming increasingly isolated, alone, and lonely, struggling, as Frankie and Johnny do, to connect to others, particularly in an intimate relationship, and considerable blame can be placed on technology that has greatly replaced genuine interaction. Audiences will see new ideas in this play, in spite of its age, as so much still applies, perhaps more so than when it was written.

Be sure to book in advance, as this is certain to attract full houses once word gets around.