

Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune – Stage Whispers Review



By Terence McNally. STARC Productions. Bakehouse Theatre. Oct 9th - 19th, 2019

Since January 2018 Adelaide's STARC productions has produced seven plays where the focus is clearly on the actor and the text. Over this time the pairing of two of its founders, Stefani Rossi and Marc Clement has seen this tight acting partnership blossom into a mutually enriching team that is somewhat reminiscent of the pairings of legendary actors Katherine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy.

Written by Tony Award winner Terence McNally, *Frankie and Johnny In The Clair De Lune* made its debut as an off-Broadway play in 1987. The play is widely performed and has just finished a season once again, on Broadway, not long before this Adelaide season. The title is a reference to the song of the early 1900s in which Frankie and Johnny were impassioned lovers.

Originally the play focused on two lonely, middle-aged people whose first date ended with them tumbling into bed. Somewhat surprisingly, Johnny is immediately certain he has found his soul mate in Frankie. She, on the other hand, is far more cautious and disinclined to jump to conclusions and at first has written off the encounter as a one-night stand. As the night unfolds, they slowly begin to reveal themselves to each other as they take tentative steps towards the possible start of a new relationship.



The pairing of Clement and Rossi sees two physically attractive people rather like the casting of Al Pacino and Michele Pfeiffer in the 1991 romantic comedy film based on this play, taking the emphasis away from Frankie's looks and focusing instead on her emotional fragility.

Under the tight direction of Tony Knight*, Clement is in his element in this role. His delivery is impeccable; every gesture, including on-stage cooking, builds character and meaning. He is relentless in his quest to win Frankie and the light and shade in his delivery gives passion, determination and deep empathy to Johnny, a man who wants to better himself and believes in love and happy endings. The scene where he calls a radio station to request for Frankie the most beautiful music ever written, *Clair de Lune*, is tender and moving.

Rather like the play's name, Rossi is luminous in this role. Her ability to shift mercurially from anger to vulnerability is mesmerising. Her targeted timing takes the audience from painful remembrances to pithy one-liners that break what could be unbearable tension, creating self-protecting feistiness, and as a shield for unwanted pain.



Towards the end of the play we discover the reason for Frankie having her hair down and my only criticism is in Rossi's repeated hair re-arranging mannerism that I, at times, found distracting.

The pace of delivery is lightning fast; overlapping dialogue is the norm, and accents are without fault. This creates two very believable people who exude passion and a slowly revealing underbelly. Their conversations are seamless and feature a very real tussle as the two share their lovelorn situations, tumble in the sheets, confide sad episodes in their lives and shift her no-no position closer to his yes-yes position. His view is that they can make this work and he poignantly tells her that he would still like to believe in love.

The setting is a simple one room Manhattan apartment with furniture and features that are carefully chosen for the style of the mid 1980's.

The Bakehouse allows the audience to be close to the performers, and for this play it feels very apt and personal. Of note is impressive lighting throughout by Stephen Dean, also used to beautifully light Rossi's face, on one occasion cleverly creating the look of a woman gazing through a window.

At 95 minutes, this piece is delivered as one act, and it works well as such. It is a great length for modern audiences who are used to shorter viewing times and it held the audience's undivided attention for the entire performance.

This play has its limitations like all plays, but it is a heartwarming story. The play is very good, but the direction and finely polished performances are the real stars in this production. See it for a masterclass in teamwork. – Jude Hines