

'Barefoot In the Park' in Berkeley

By Susan Kuchinskas

CORRESPONDENT

Article Launched: 01/25/2008 10:29:36 AM PST

"Barefoot in the Park," the latest production by the Actors Ensemble of Berkeley, mulls some perpetual truths with real heart.

The Neil Simon chestnut concerns a watershed period in the 6-day-old marriage of Paul and Corie Bratter. Corie is what they used to call "madcap." Her idea of fun is to stay out late, drinking and singing at dive restaurants. She thinks their rundown apartment with a hole in the roof is romantic and charming. Paul, an ambitious young lawyer, really needs to get a good night's sleep and have a place where he can prepare for tomorrow's big trial.

Part of their problem may be that Corie is a housewife. She has nothing to do to burn off energy except decorate the apartment. When Paul finally comes home, exhausted from his day and climbing the five flights of stairs, the last thing he wants to do is have an adventure. Today, Corie would be just as exhausted from her own job.

The play, Neil Simon's third, premiered on Broadway in 1963 with Robert Redford and Elizabeth Ashley playing the leads, to huge acclaim. Director Mike Nichols won a Tony, and both actors were nominated. But, like many of the oldies mounted locally, the play seems dated and a bit out of touch. (Of the 2006 Broadway revival, the New York Times' Ben Brantley wrote, "... early Neil Simon retains its original freshness about as well as sushi.")

Director Alan Barkan wrote that he sees the play as one of the final flowers of the Kennedy Camelot era, when "innocence was the norm, and to walk barefoot in the park, even Central Park, was an experience not limited to free spirits and those in love." The idea that New Yorkers -- or most anyone else -- would dare to set an unshod foot in a public park or let a neighbor climb through their bedroom window has vanished in the mists of time, along with the whole madcap thing and even the concept of newlyweds.

The crux of the play is Corie and Paul's first big blow-up -- and this part still feels realistic and true. In almost every love relationship, there comes a moment when one or both people question whether they should be together and either make a deeper commitment or begin to disengage. Wendy Welch and Paul Irving as the young couple take us through this process with depth and genuine feeling.

The entire cast is strong. David Spinner manages to make Victor Velasco, the amorous but scammy neighbor, genuinely attractive. Ljuba Davis plays Corie's mom as a contemporary 50-year-old, maybe a little set in her ways, but still vital.

David Irving is highly believable -- and very likable -- as Paul, effectively foiling Corie without coming off as a prig. Wendy Welch has good looks and charm; her Corie is a bit awkward physically, but she never lets the character descend into stereotype. Even Jose Garcia and Jerome Solberg, taking on extra duty in addition to their jobs as stage manager and producer, respectively, make their bit parts as delivery and repair men into flash character studies.

Director Barkan keeps the action flowing and the characters moving naturally around the set without seeming stagey or stagnant. He's helped by Shu Ping Guan's ingenious set design. It

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extends the action onto the rooftop and offers the actors plenty of space to work within the confines of one room. Her décor, as well as costumes by Helen Slomowitz, evoke the '60s without kitsch.

If you're looking for something heartwarming and a little fluffy to chase winter's darkness, you could do worse than go barefoot here.

The production is dedicated to Jack Tucker, Louis Flynn and Ralph Miller, three elders of East Bay theater who are no longer with us. Tucker was the former theater columnist for this paper, a dear friend of mine, and the person who recommended me for this job. This review is dedicated to him.

Susan Kuchinkas writes in Berkeley. Reach her at susan@kuchinkas.com.

IF YOU GO

WHAT: "Barefoot in the Park"

WHEN: 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays through Feb. 16

WHERE: Live Oak Theater, 1301 Shattuck (at Berryman), Berkeley.

TICKETS: General admission is \$12, \$10 for students and seniors. For more information or reservations, call  510-649-5999 or see visit. AEOfBerkeley.org. Tickets can be purchased online with credit card at <http://www.BrownPaperTickets.com>.

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