

## **The Theater: Actors Ensemble's 'Barefoot in the Park' at Live Oak**

*By Ken Bullock, Special to the Planet (01-25-08)*

A door on-stage is thrown open, and a vivacious young woman (Wendy Welch as Corie Bratter) surveys the room before her, and heaves a happy sigh. The room is a bare, freshly-painted fifth-floor walkup apartment, with only a ladder and paint cans for adornment.

Corie's little Arcadia is, in her mind, a love nest for her and brand-new husband Paul (David Irving), from which they may romp in early '60s New York. Corie's the pert, adventuresome one, whose escapade gives Neil Simon's comedy its title, *Barefoot in the Park*, at Berkeley Actors Ensemble.

Paul's her straight man, a lawyer just handed his first case: "Staid," Corie taunts him with when they argue, an observer to her doer. She's constantly egging him on, in her exuberance, to join her in stunts and games.

Corie also thinks the five-floor walkup will serve as a barrier to her stifling mother (Ljuba Davis as Ethel Banks), though it just gives the be-furred yenta another scene to dramatize, when she makes it over from 'way out in Jersey, where she lives alone.

(Though a comic telephone man (Jerome Solberg) has a few tart things to say about the ascent; a delivery man (Jose Garcia) on the other hand is too winded to complain.)

Rounding out the cast is eccentric upstairs neighbor, Mr. Victor Velasco (David Spinner), bon vivant, raconteur and jack-of-all-trades, who makes his appearance requesting the use of the Bratter's window to enter his apartment.

Corie craftily sets up her mother with Mr. Velasco, who insists they all convene at an Albanian restaurant on Staten Island. But her cleverness hits the wall when Mrs. Banks and Mr. Velasco really do seem to hit it off—and her husband gets on her about her irresponsible highjinks. Corie suddenly is more overprotective of her mother than her mother is of her and falls apart over Paul's criticism, questioning whether they were ever in love.

Director Alan Barkan, together with assistant director Eric Carlson, worked well with cast members, who rise up from the one-liners of former TV gagman Simon to become an ensemble, especially during the hysterical second act. But even Simon's gags aren't so easy to deliver—the combination of tossed-off giddiness with a little Big Apple sangfroid is often missed in productions far from Manhattan. The Actors Ensemble bunch hits the mark much more often than not.

Wendy Welch shows great comic flair, her maniacally gesturing hands and forearms syncopating the madcap movement of her various funny walks. David Irving is a fine foil for her nutty exuberance, getting his own back in the end.

Ljuba Davis, in her theatrical debut, shows her long experience as a folk singer, comfortable with stage and dialogue as she spins out a performance that seems to send up both her character and herself, with great good humor. And David Spinner is a dead ringer for his Neil Simon eccentric turn, charming and goofy and at moments the sanest of the bunch.

Alan Barkan, in his program note, points out that the play opened a month before the JFK assassination, at the tail-end of that time of public optimism that characterized the early '60s. "At least then, laughter came easier." Helen Slomowitz's costumes, as ever, pinpoint the time and place, as well as Shu Ping Guan's "decorated" apartment, which goes from blank to busy, bare to kitsch.

In the end, the comedy goes through the roof: Corie and Paul, dimly glimpsed above the skylight, shouting admonitions and endearments to each other, and boisterous nonsense to the rest of the world—that is, New York—in general.

#### BAREFOOT IN THE PARK

Presented by Berkeley Actors Ensemble at

8 p.m. Friday and Saturday through Feb. 16 at

Live Oak Theater, 1301 Shattuck Ave. \$10-\$12.