

Champlain Theatre Delivers Romance, Canadian Style

By **Jim Lowe** Times Argus Staff

BURLINGTON – Leave it to the Canadians to come up with a modern romantic comedy that is charming – in the deepest sense – without being trite or maudlin.

Champlain Theatre opened a production of Evelyne de la Chenelière's "Strawberries in January," in a translation from the French by Morwyn Brebner, Wednesday at Champlain College, that explores today's complex and cynical love with yesterday's optimism.

The Champlain College production, a professional rather than student creation, benefited from direction by Gordon McCall, former artistic director of Montreal's Centaur Theatre, and a fine – largely local – cast.

"Strawberries in January" is a romance that begins in the movies but inevitably has to face daylight. François, an aspiring film writer who toils in a café by day, shares his apartment in Montreal with Sophie, a "modern" girl. The play begins with François telling Robert, a college professor, about his rejection of Sophie's marriage proposal.

Sophie's take is that she rejected him. That's because his story is in the screenplay he is writing, and hers is a little closer to the truth. But is it?

Robert may not be all he seems to be either. At one point, the college professor meets Lea, a free spirit, when he visits her country bed and breakfast. A complaint about a dead mouse in his bed leads to a quick romance.

Lea, it turns out, is a childhood friend of Sophie, and coincidentally turns up in François' café. After François and Sophie break up, he – being modern and all that – introduces her to Robert. At first, Robert and Sophie click, but then reality sets in.

So which is better, film fantasy or reality?

The Champlain Theatre production is a pretty polished affair, fast-paced and convincing. McCall, who is now a theater professor at Indiana's Purdue University, is responsible for much of that. Not only did he get the best out of some fine Vermont actors, he designed the slickly attractive set and supportive costuming.

Maria Souza, a recent Purdue theater graduate now living in New Jersey, managed to combine effervescence and depth as the love-seeking Sophie, who covers her normal desires with a sheen of contemporary superficiality. Seth Jarvis, a Champlain veteran, was a natural as the earnest and self-deceiving François, making his vulnerability feel real (his loud lament about not needing any more girls that are "just friends" in his life was as convincing as it is universal).

Veteran Vermont actor John D. Alexander was charmingly and realistically pompous as the deceptive Robert, and his tirade against his lazy students was priceless. Heather Nielsen was successful mixing contemporary complacency with real inner yearnings as Lea (Montpelier audiences will recognize Alexander and Nielsen as Helen Keller's parents in Lost Nation Theater's "The Miracle Worker").

No surprise that there was a bit of opening night awkwardness, but the charm and humor of this little gem was delivered in spades. Joanne Farrell, the Champlain college theater professor and this production's producer, is to be credited with bringing such high level and imaginative theater to the Burlington area.

