

Review: Champlain Theatre's "Strawberries in January"

BY BRENT HALLENBECK, FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER • SEPTEMBER 10, 2009

"Strawberries in January" doesn't really have anything new to say about love — its basic message is that people tell lies on the surface to get what they want and deep down to mask their pain. It tours that familiar territory, however, in a refreshing and engaging way, making the Champlain Theatre production that opened Sept. 9 a nice start for the local fall theater season.

Set in Montreal, "Strawberries in January" was written by Quebecois playwright Evelyne de la Cheneliere and translated into English by Morwyn Brebner. The one-act play — the Champlain Theatre production flies by in about 75 minutes — is essentially a love quadrangle involving Francois (played by Seth Jarvis), a regular Joe who serves cups of joe at his coffeehouse; his mercurial roommate/lover Sophie (Maria Souza), who sets off the romantic script by bringing Francois a basket of the titular fruit; and Robert (John D. Alexander), a customer at Francois' shop who thinks of his own lost chance at love with a rural innkeeper named Lea (Heather Nielsen) while hearing Francois' tales of love gone wrong.

The love stories and love woes take place in a fanciful, magical-realism style that captures the giddiness of love and surrealism of love behaving badly. Scenes play out as flashbacks with the actors in the current scene commenting on them; at other times, a scene happens the way a character tells it, then the way it actually happened. Some of the more unusual touches included by director Gordon McCall make little sense, such as Francois spinning as a burbling noise goes off in the background every time he pours coffee. Others set the right light-hearted tone, as when Francois says "I have an idea" and a "ding" goes off as a light bulb suspended from the ceiling brightens before Francois acknowledges in an aside that "it was a bad idea."

Francois is at the heart of a play with a lot of heart, and Jarvis — who has starred in Champlain Theatre productions such as "The Cripple of Inishmaan" as well as his own farce "The Once and Future Ubu" — is the right actor to play him. He gives Francois a suave Everyman quality that makes him both likable and recognizable, allowing his character to be the one in the play who's easiest to identify with, even in those moments when he's a cad.

Souza, a graduate of the fine-arts program at Purdue University where McCall teaches, gives bubbly depth to Sophie, displaying the varied characteristics that Francois describes her as having, from charm to self-centered-ness. Alexander, who earlier this year starred in the Green Candle Theatre Company's production of "American Buffalo," is always entertaining, though it's a little hard to figure out why women are drawn to his often stuffy, pretentious character. Nielsen, who was strong as Cordelia in last year's production of "King Lear" by Vermont Stage, plays up the sprightly nature of the assertive, confident yet carefree Lea, who might be the only honest character in the entire play.

McCall, who was artistic director of Centaur Theatre in Montreal for a decade, keeps "Strawberries in January" flowing at a quick pace rivaling the flow of blood through your veins at those moments when love settles in. He's also the production's set designer and smartly employs deep reds and blacks in many of the furnishings and costumes to give visual support to the passions unfolding and unraveling on stage. He uses French-language music in the background yet opts not to have the actors speak in French accents, a combination that sends conflicting signals about the play's setting.

In the end, the Champlain Theatre production of "Strawberries in January" doesn't greatly evoke Montreal, our urban neighbor to the north. It does have a universal quality free of geographical and theatrical bounds that makes it an illuminating, and enjoyable, journey through the joys and pitfalls of romance.