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Review: "Frankie and Johnny"

*** 1/2 RATING

By Bob Bows

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Folk tales have a way of evolving as we reinterpret them to fit the times. Consider the ongoing popularity of playwright Terrence McNally's 1987 hit "Frankie and Johnny in the Claire de Lune," an update of the famous blues ballad that has struck a chord with contemporary performers and audiences alike.

One of America's pre-eminent dramatists ("Love, Valour! Compassion!", "Master Class," "Kiss of the Spider Woman"), McNally takes the once tragic story - "He was her man, but he done her wrong" - and turns it into a hard-hitting but ultimately redeeming romantic drama of two souls struggling with the onset of a loveless middle age in the anonymous purgatory of New York City.

In Paragon Theatre's current production,



Thomas Borrillo and Emily Paton Davies in "Frankie and Johnny" (Paragon Theatre)

director Michael Stricker wisely casts the talented duo of Emily Paton Davies and Thomas Borrillo as the foundering pair of hard-luck losers. Davies and Borrillo's off-stage chemistry magically comes alive on stage, strategically employed in the late night emotional rollercoaster ride that rumbles through Frankie's (Davies') apartment.

Delivering psychologically (and sometimes physically) naked performances, Davies and Borrillo discover the truths about commitment that all lovers must face, and, in this version of the tale, eventually resolve.

As the old lyrics say, "Frankie and Johnny were lovers," and the play begins in total darkness amid the sounds of pleasure from the fold-out sofa bed. With the relationship off to a great start, Johnny (Borrillo) comes on strong, launching into a heartfelt yet relentless campaign to win Frankie's affections.

Frankie, who's been "done wrong" enough times to question the possibility of love, tries to douse Johnny's irrepressible ardor, and soon feels trapped by his irrepressible pursuit. Johnny believes that Frankie's past has made her so guarded that if he gives up they'll lose their last chance at a meaningful life.

McNally's thoughtful script provides plenty of room for the pair, each in turn, to convince us of their respective cases. Davies handles the complexities of Frankie's arc with ease, transitioning from the aura of coital bliss to uneasiness to concern and back again, exploring and then finally embracing the trust prerequisite to accepting herself and "her man" for who they are.

Borrillo, too, flexes his range in creating cohesion between Johnny's multifaceted and contradictory facets - street philosopher, jailbird, comic, and reformer - as he hangs onto love's greatest aspirations by a tenuous thread.

Together, the director and the actors achieve a remarkable symbiosis between the universal forces at work here, squaring off with both Frankie and Johnny's darkest despairs and greatest desires.

McNally's mastery comes to the fore in a well-tempered mix of humor and poignancy, finding a moral in a tale that originally professed to having none, with the once star-crossed lovers ultimately triumphing in the enchanted moonlight.

Bob Bows also reviews theater for Variety, for KUVU/89.3 FM and coloradodrama.com. He can be reached at BBows@coloradodrama.com.

"Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune" | *** 1/2 RATING

DRAMA|Paragon Theatre Company|Written by Terrence McNally|Directed by Michael Stricker| Starring Emily Paton Davies and Thomas Borrillo|THROUGH MARCH 10|At Phoenix Theatre, 1124 Santa Fe Drive|7:30 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays|2 hours, 10 minutes|\$17-\$19|303-300-2210 or paragontheatre.com

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