

Siebert and Gunderson poignant performers in 'Frankie & Johnny'



Siebert and Gunderson portray two lonely middle-aged people down on their luck. (Tom Hall, 2013)



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Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune opened at the Lab Theater this weekend. Poignantly portrayed by Loretta Siebert and Tim Gunderman, *Frankie and Johnny* is a complex psychological study of the quiet desperation so many of us experience when we stand naked before the mirror and take stock of the mess we've made of our lives.

While billed as a romantic comedy, *Frankie and Johnny* is filled with raw moments of post-coital introspection and revelation sandwiched between cold meatloaf and western omelettes. And playwright Terrence McNally serves them up through the delicious device (if not artifice) of intriguing role reversals.

The play opens with Frankie and Johnny in the throes of passion in her cramped New York flat after her admiration of his wrists as he slices and dices peppers at the restaurant where they work leads to a first date. But once Frankie's come, all she wants is for Johnny to go so that she can watch a little TV, eat some ice cream and sleep blissfully in. (It is after 3 a.m. after all!) But to Frankie's chagrin, Johnny has convinced himself that he and Frankie are meant to be together, and he launches into a cornucopia of words and seemingly random stories in his attempt to pierce her emotional armour and convince her that they can build a deep and mutually fulfilling relationship together.

Ignoring Frankie's requests that he head on back to Brooklyn, er Brooklyn Heights, Johnny

waxes philosophic, quoting and misquoting Shakespeare to Frankie's alternating amusement and consternation, in an impassioned attempt to prove to Frankie that their union is ordained by kismet. Both are from the same town in Pennsylvania. Both attended the same grammar school. Both of their mothers left them when they were seven. But having sated her need for physical intimacy, Frankie wants to be left alone. Still, Johnny presses her for unwanted and unwelcome emotional intimacy.

This compels the audience to ponder what lies at the root of this implausible role reversal. Why is Johnny so needy? Why is Frankie so aloof? At first blush it appears Frankie, a failed actress, has resigned herself to life as a waitress in one of the city's many greasy spoons. It's only when she pulls back her chestnut tresses and reveals the imprint of a belt buckle on the back of her scalp that we discover Frankie's caution in affairs of the heart stems from being the victim of domestic violence. Johnny kisses the spot and tells her the scar is "all gone now," but he has a lot more work to do to convince her that she is worthy of love and respect ... and that he will love her even after he gets to the know the real Frankie scars, character flaws and all.

For his part, Johnny's neediness stems from the realization that he's botched his life in more ways than he ever thought possible. He's a reformed alcoholic, ex-con, divorcee with two kids he rarely sees because in his own estimation, he has so little to offer them in comparison to the idyllic life they lead with their mother and stepdad in their Maine mansion overlooking the sea. Although bad decisions and overall bad luck have beaten Johnny down, he remains an optimist and inveterate romantic. But he's a realist as well. About to turn 47, time is running out and he's desperate to truly connect with someone. For him, that someone is Frankie.

And that is the true essence of this odd, quirky, but equally remarkable production. It's an upfront, in-your-face study of what it takes for two people to truly connect. Without pretense. Without prejudging. Stripped totally naked and emotionally bare so that all of their imperfections, flaws and blemishes are revealed not only in the pale blue light of the moon, but the harsh light of the next day's sun.

Director Brenda Kensler did a terrific job in casting Loretta Siebert and Tim Gunderman for these roles. The duo are actually better suited, more believable and more authentic than Michelle Pfeiffer and Al Pacino, who played the parts in the movie several years ago.

The thoughtful and intelligent Siebert does a convincing job of playing the simple, poorly educated Frankie, who admits that while she secretly yearns to become a teacher, she'd have to go back to school to learn the subjects she'd be teaching. And while Siebert aspires to ever greater and more challenging roles, you would swear she was the epitome of the unassuming, life-defeated, middle-aged server who's waited on you dozens of times at the local Waffle House, IHOP or Perkins restaurant.

Gunderman's character seems a little less of a stretch. In real life, Tim comes across as positive, energetic and penultimately self-confident. The latter is justified by past accomplishments and current projects. He has had small parts in several local subject films and various television shows, and coinciding with *Frankie and Johnny*, he has also co-written a pilot for a web series called *Lost in Reality* that is currently in production. He is also the Assistant Technical Director of the Fort Myers Film Festival. Tim recently graduated from Full Sail University with a Bachelor of Science in Computer Animation, and lives life fully as an accomplished artist, sculptor and model maker.

Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune has seven shows remaining - on November 14, 15, 16, 17, 21, 22 and 23. Tickets are between \$12 and \$22 and are available for purchase at the door or online at **laboratorytheaterflorida.com**. Season tickets are also available on the website.