

Review: Lab Theater pours drinks, finds laughs with "Picasso at the Lapin Agile"

By CHRIS SILK

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The Laboratory Theater of Florida opened their fall season with absurdist Steve Martin comedy "Picasso at the Lapin Agile" Friday. While the play delivers laughs aplenty, it fails to fully embrace the premise that has Picasso, Einstein and Elvis walk into a bar in 1904 Paris.

Martin (yes, that Steve Martin) penned the show. "Lapin Agile" means to debate the value of genius (Einstein) vs. talent (Picasso). Supporting characters offer specific insights as to how forces such as blatant commercialism, music, commerce, love and even sex will reshape the world in the 20th century.

The play's nontraditional structure sees cast members sometimes talk to the audience, snatch up a playbill, enter and exit at random and even break the fourth wall. Sentences fall like random raindrops in a deserted arrondissement; conversations form, break apart and re-form across the room or with mere glances. Oh, to be in Paris....

Director Lois C. Kuehne assembles one of the Lab Theater's strongest-ever casts for "Lapin Agile." Unfortunately, she just doesn't do enough with them at times.

Absurdist plays, like farces, require a particular energy. "Lapin Agile" needs to be more like its "nimble rabbit" namesake, bolt out of the gate and keep running. I wish the show had more of an edge, or possibly an extra gear. I wanted "Lapin Agile" to climb into the rafters and celebrate its own garish strangeness instead sitting quietly in a pretty cafe playing word-pong.

Still, the show's witty verbiage, flights of fancy and clever wordplay make for an amusing evening. Kuehne remains a genius at costuming and design. She shifts the action off the Lab Theater's awkward stage onto the floor, creating a chic Parisian cafe. Audience members mingle at tiny tables à manger with colorful checkered tablecloths, flowers and crunchy miniature breadsticks (baguettes, natch!). The atmosphere alone lifts the show beyond measure.

Walls of the Lapin Agile bar, a watering hole for the thinkers and literati of Paris, come decorated with a charming melange of prints, drawings, watercolors and paintings from artists of every stripe. Customers (the actors) perch on mismatched chaises and swill cheap wine. Oh, to be in Paris....

Will you like "Picasso at the Lapin Agile?" That depends entirely on taste. Sex, breasts, male equipment and discussions thereof feature prominently, as well as a funny little Frenchman (a delightfully quirky Robert Feigenblatt) who gets little of the aforementioned sex. You'll love his cranky, single-minded Gaston. Curiously, for a play set in Paris, his is the only French accent.

An electric, swing-for-the-fences Wil Harbison steals the play in just 356 words. When his "famous inventor" Charles Dabernow Schmendiman hits the stage, the show's energy dials up to seventeen. The character is a throwaway - a nod to encroaching commercialism, rapacious greed and even a peek at today's instant celebrities. The actor hits exactly the right outrageous notes (squeaking a toy horn, caroming off furniture) in capturing the absurdist nature of the piece.

Rob Green brings a goofy charm to his Einstein. A brief, love-stricken moment with a lady admirer, when Green shivers with love's wonders, is another of the play's unappreciated delights. Aaron Jackson injects a fierce dose of masculinity into his virile, volatile Picasso. Every woman in the room - not just those on stage - swoons as he seduces first Suzanne and then barmaid Germaine. Oh, to be in Paris....

Look too for Lucy Harris as Germaine. The actress uses her comic skills to good effect, adding a bracing edge to lines and coming close to Martin's diffident take on her character. Bosoms on display, hair twirled up in a bun with feathers, she rules the bar. Germaine's snarky comments, delivered perfectly at the end of speeches, punctuate the play.

I wish the show had done more to highlight the central genius (Einstein) vs. talent (Picasso) debate. When you attend, look behind the laughs. Tucked within the comedy and speeches from the various supporting characters lies a look at the nature of the creative process itself, how inspiration springs into being and different forms of "genius" itself.

"Picasso at the Lapin Agile" offers an interesting, entertaining evening that sets the greatest minds of art and science against each other. Throw in a sassy barmaid, a random people off the street, a sexy young woman and an insane "inventor" - and you've got a party in Paris!

"As she rode along through Paris, in a sports car, with the warm wind in her hair."
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