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Café Variations

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What is it about the Gershwins that keeps them so relevant? More than 80 years after George Gershwin's untimely death there are two shows on Broadway that feature scores by the brothers: a streamlined "Porgy and Bess" and a new musical with Gershwin songs, "Nice Work If You Can Get It," which opens next Tuesday. Here in Boston the Boston Pops offers a Gershwin spectacular early next month and at the Cutler-Majestic is another new Gershwin musical - "**Café Variations**," a droll and effusive entertainment that runs through Sunday.

It may not be to everyone's tastes: unlike the new-styled Gershwin shows (such as the shows mentioned above and hits like "My One and Only" and "Crazy for You") that rework the shows the brothers wrote in the 1920s and 1930s, "Café Variations" doesn't offer old-fashioned musical-comedy. Nor does it have much of a narrative at all. Instead what director Anne Bogart has done is take playlets by her long-time collaborator Charles Mee and informed them with songs and musical interludes by the Gershwins. Set in what appears to be a cafe in an upscale hotel, it takes Mee's short scenes and gives them a "Grand Hotel" treatment: vignettes whose connecting tissue is the subject of romance.



A scene from "Café Variations" (Source: Paul Marotta, Perfect Bokeh Photography)



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Cole Porter may have wondered, "what is this thing called love?"; but it was the Gershwins that provided the answer with a series of songs (many now standards) that captured the thrill of romance (and ensuing heartbreak) with innocence and sophistication. Ira Gershwin's lyrics may often seem too-clever-by-a-half, but few of his peers wrote rhymes as witty and incisive about the vagaries of love. Add brother George's distinctive music, tinged with jazzy rhythms and unabashed lyricism, and you have the formula that added immeasurably to what came to define musical-comedy during Broadway's most fruitful years. Ethan Mordden described its appeal as "something infectious, seductive. It makes you wish you could be in a musical-comedy, too. Not performing in one: living there."

Bogart writes in the program that she was interested in a piece that "would interweave scenes from many of Charles Mee's plays that happen in cafes. One of Mee's recurring themes is the philosopher Heidegger's notion that we become who we are through our relationships with other people and to the environment."

At first it's hard to think of Mee's characters that populate this show as living in that musical-comedy world. They seem too modern, too self-aware. Yet Bogart, working with actors from her SITI company and students from Emerson College, makes Mee's modernism retro - retrofitting, so to speak, the Gershwin songs to his ever-shifting scenarios. It helps that costume designer Caitlin Ward dresses the women in 1940s styled dresses (replete with petticoats) and the men in period suits, and that the musical accompaniment provided by a large on-stage band sounds authentic, like old Paul Whiteman records.



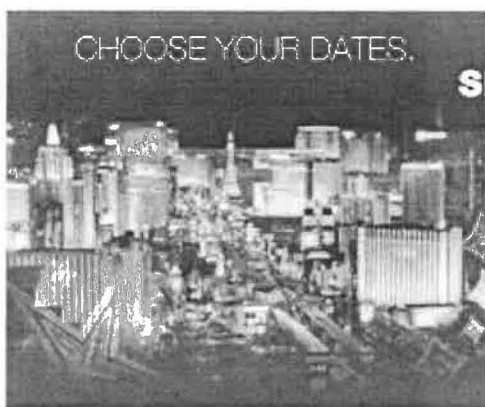
A scene from "Café Variations" (Source: Paul Marotta, Perfect Bokeh Photography)

The concept has ten characters (named A, B and C), each played by three actors, who move through Mee's sometimes baffling, sometimes intriguing relationships. It is a lot to take in, especially given the piece's lack of narrative (it's more of a theme and variations) and the oblique nature of the dialogue. Why it works at all is a combination of the symmetry with the music and the dynamics of the staging, which can move from an over-crowded stage to one in which sits just one couple in what seems like seconds. Bogart integrates Barney O'Hanlon's choreography with seamless skill and she receives an immeasurable boost from Rachel Grimes' superb arrangements and orchestrations. Gershwin never sounded so good.

Two couples provide the piece's most memorable characters. First there's Tilly (Tilly A as played by Deborah Wallace), a lonely woman who comes to the café in search of romance like a character out of Nathaniel West. She finds it in Henry, the café's ever-so-proper maître-d', who breaks his pose long enough to express his interest in her. (Henry A is played by Tom Nelis.) The second couple is Edith (Edith A played by Ellen Lauren) and Andrew (Andrew A played by Leon Ingulstrud), an odd couple to say the least - she's brash and forward; he's reserved and argumentative; yet they manage to hit it off.

There are some awkward moments - "Café Variations" is essentially a work in progress having its world premiere - yet it is dramatically and musically resonant, capturing in the unusual coupling of Mee's words and Gershwin's songs the sweetness and tart undertaste of romance; and doing so with skillful theatricality. It may appear a bit esoteric, but it is magical nonetheless, especially in its touching final moments.

"Café Variations" continues through April 22, 2012 at the Cutler-Majestic Theatre, 219 Tremont St., Boston. 617.824.8400. 8pm/all ages/\$25-\$75. @ArtsEmerson. artsemerson.org.



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