



"What Happened in Boston, Willie"

Reviews of Current Productions

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"Cafe Variations"

A Review by Sheila Barth

At the recent opening of the world premiere of Charles L. Mee Jr.'s "Cafe Variations" in Boston's Cutler Majestic Theatre, ArtsEmerson Executive Director Rob Orchard enthusiastically praised the 1 hour 40 minute, one-act collaborative work between Emerson Stage and New York's SITI Company. He called it a "most ambitious performance".

He spoke from balcony box seats, saying there was no room for him on stage, with 70 people bustling about, behind the curtain. The cast alone boasted 40 members, composed of SITI members, 22 Emerson College students, and Equity performers. Behind a backdrop of glittering strips, an impressive orchestra led by Jon Goldberg was occasionally visible, thanks to Brian H. Scott's colorful lighting shining through and Neil Patel's set design, which lifted the backdrop part way.

Orchard had especial praise for his prestigious friend, Director Anne Bogart, who teaches graduate courses at Columbia University and is SITI's co-founder and artistic director.

Fusing Charles L. Mee's book and anecdotes of cafe encounters with some of George and Ira Gershwin's songs, Bogart created a patchwork of people meeting at a cafe, finding love, breaking up, dancing, rejoicing, weeping, fighting, and resolving.

The primary cast is divided into three sets of 10 characters: Henry, Peter, Harold, Raymond, Andrew, Tilly, Edith, Ya-Ya, Nanette and Lucia A.B, and C. Although the actors are listed in the playbill, it's difficult to identify who's who, especially when the set of three characters is dressed in similar outfits. The women wear swishy, crinolined 1950's jewel-hued and polka-dotted dresses, while the gents are garbed in waitstaff or tuxedo attire.

"Cafe Variations" has all the right stuff - Neil Patel's lovely set, Rafael Jaen's costumes and a talented ensemble, but Barney O'Hanlon's choreography, save one jazzy ensemble rendition of "Lady Be Good," is uninspiring. At times, taped interludes of George Gershwin's masterpiece, "Rhapsody in Blue," fill the air. It would have been superb to see a fully choreographed number, but that didn't happen.

Excluding a brief, ethereal, chorus singing the Gershwin Bros.' lovely, "Embraceable You," or an actress' lively solo of "Blah, Blah, Blah," most of "Cafe Variations" was blah, and philosophical speeches sound empty amid "Cafe's" perpetual motion.

There was one wild scene in which an older couple meets, and the lady, who has lived an unromantic life, hotly pursues a clod. For some unknown reason, they engage in a strip card game (in the cafe), a desperate embrace and short-lived relationship. "You're poisonous," she shouts. "You're old, and you're ugly - after midnight," he retorts. Ranting, she races offstage, around the theater, out the door, then bounces back. Later, she begs him to stop ignoring her and return to her. In another vignette, a guy who's rejected, wants his love back. Although he sings near her, he then jumps up on the bar counter to finish his solo of "Love is Here to Stay;" but his voice and the moment fall flat.

In an earlier musical set, a young woman sits weeping, bawling, hoping to find the love of her life. The dignified, older waiter says he loves her - it's love at first sight - and comforts her. But in the final number, he releases her, saying he's too old for her, singing a plaintive, sentimental "They Can't Take That Away from Me".

"Cafe Variations" (13 - 22 April)

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