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The Last Romance is a Romantic Comedy for All Ages in San Jose

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By Jeannie Smith

Joe DiPietro's *The Last Romance*, currently running at the San Jose Repertory Theatre, is an amusing piece about love that happens later in life. The central question posed in the program asks, "Is it ever too late for love?" and the play answers it rather obliquely, giving us a portrait of romance that may seem unlikely on the face of it, but rings true with charm and wit.

We meet Ralph (Will Marchetti), clearly a "Senior," as he waits on a park bench for something or someone, fending off the remonstrations of his overly protective sister, Rose (Sharon Lockwood) and the distraction of numerous dogs. Soon we discover why he wanted to wait - enter Carol (Kitty Winn), also "Senior" and attractive dog owner. Turns out Ralph had spotted Carol on a previous walk and has been staking out the dog park hoping she would appear again so that he could devise an excuse for meeting her.

It's an uphill battle, at first - Carol seems far from interested in meeting anyone - but Ralph persists, and a relationship develops by fits and starts. Funny how we find ourselves rooting for Ralph almost immediately; something about wanting to see him succeed, wanting to see romance happen - it must be ingrained in our social fabric, like why we cheer when we see a public proposal and acceptance.

As the relationship grows, encounters obstacles, and blossoms, we cheer more for the hope that's embedded in the fledgling romance. Ralph and Carol generate endearment and empathy, and it's late in the day for both of them. Why shouldn't they succeed and enjoy whatever time they have left in the joy of loving companionship? There are issues - aren't there always? The ending may or may not be happy, but the ode to love is writ large here, with operatic accompaniment and dramatic plot twists.

Clever dialogue and charming characters are fleshed out by excellent actors all around. Winn and Marchetti are well-matched in types and chemistry, and each has the flawless comic timing that comes with experience. It's a treat to see veteran actors having such good fun with each other and with well-written characters.

Lockwood does well with the somewhat strident Rose, especially when she gets a chance to show some vulnerability and softness. Joshua Jeremiah rounds out the cast as "The Young Man," a dreamy vision of Ralph in his younger days, when he aspired to sing opera on the stage of the Met. At first the character seems somewhat superfluous, but his connection to the action begins to become clear, and his superbly rendered arias add drama and poignancy. The "larger than life" feelings associated with romance that are expressed in opera speak perfectly to the drama happening for Ralph and Carol.

The set, by Michael Ganio, is as clever as the dialogue, creating several spaces with economy, but is also lushly romantic, with just the right touch of autumn. Beautiful lighting by Daniel Meeker softens the edges and bathes Ralph



Ralph (Will Marchetti) is excited to find out Carol (Kitty Winn) has surprised him with tickets to the opera in San Jose Rep's regional premiere of *The Last Romance*. Photo by Kevin Berne.

and Carol in a wistful aura. Elizabeth Poindexter's costumes tell us volumes about the characters.

In short, it's a gem, a thoroughly entertaining evening, with plenty of humor, gorgeous music, excellent acting, and a touching story. I have a quarrel with the play's end, but you may not feel the same. You'll just have to see it for yourself and decide if you agree. You won't regret it.

What: The Last Romance, by Joe DiPietro, presented by San Jose Repertory Theatre

Where: 101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose 95113

When: Tuesdays-Wednesdays at 7:30pm, Thursdays-Saturdays at 8:00pm, Saturday matinees at 3:00pm, Sunday matinees at 2:00pm; through Nov. 6

Tickets: \$10 - \$74, 408-367-7255 or at www.sjrep.com.

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