

Review: 'The Last Romance' at San Jose Rep

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The early moments of "The Last Romance" echo the sentiments of "September Song," that pop standard from the late 1930s by Kurt Weill and Maxwell Anderson.

An older man sits alone on a bench in a park ablaze with the colors of fall. He is clearly waiting for someone -- perhaps anyone -- to enter his life. You can almost hear the song's lyrics in the background: "When the autumn weather turns the leaves to flame, one hasn't got time for the waiting game."

"Last Romance," which opened Wednesday at San Jose Repertory Theatre in a regional premiere, is all about romance and whether you can find it again in your golden years after losing the one you love. It is also a work you end up liking more than loving.

Ralph Bellini (Will Marchetti) is a blue-collar kind of guy, who has worked all his life for the railroad, though he was once a talented opera singer. After the death of his wife, he lives with his younger sister, Rose (Sharon Lockwood), who becomes almost a surrogate mother to him.

Then one day, he sees Carol Reynolds (Kitty Winn), an elegant and reserved woman who lives in an upscale apartment building nearby and walks her dog in the park. There's a spark in Ralph's heart, something he hasn't felt in a while.

It turns out that Carol may be lonelier than Ralph. She has just gotten her dog because she is afraid of growing old completely alone.

This odd couple gets off to a stumbling start since neither has done this dance in some time. He makes inappropriate jokes and lies about things. She is reserved and, it turns out, also lying about things.

But somehow, it all starts to come together, and Carol and Ralph find themselves falling into a romance, if not precisely love. Then things get complicated, and it is, as Ralph suggests early on, like opera.

"The thing about opera, see, is all the lovers want to do is be in love," he says. "But it ain't ever that simple. Something always gets in the way."

Written by Joe DiPietro, whose credits include "I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change" and the book for the Tony-winning "Memphis," the play is one you really want to like. Especially since director Laird Williamson from San Francisco's American Conservatory Theater gives it such a fine staging.

It has some funny and moving moments. The dialogue is often smart and honest. The touch of having a younger Ralph (Joshua Jeremiah) connect the individual scenes with snippets of opera is clever, although it does help if you know Leoncavallo's "Pagliacci" from Mozart's "Cosi fan tutte."



Will Marchetti as Ralph and Kitty Winn as Carol. Photo by Jennifer Bullock, PRx Inc.

And, certainly, putting two older people at center stage and letting them be funny and complex is something to be applauded and appreciated.

But DiPietro's work has considerable flaws. The tonal shifts are often abrupt and jarring. More important, the character development happens so quickly at times that you find yourself thinking, "What just happened there?"

(The play clocks in at just 1 hour and 35 minutes, which gives the emotions little time to ripen as they should.)

DiPietro originally wrote "Last Romance" as a vehicle for Marion Ross (the wonderful actress who played the mother on "Happy Days") and her actor-husband, Paul Michael. One suspects their natural chemistry filled in some gaps in the work when they performed it last year at San Diego's Old Globe.

There were signs on opening night, though, that Marchetti and Winn will develop that kind of chemistry and make the shifts in mood and relationship more believable.

Marchetti -- a veteran area actor who has appeared regularly at the Rep -- is terrific as Ralph. And while Winn seemed a little tentative in the opening scenes on Wednesday, she eventually captured the glow of a woman finding the kind of romance she never thought she'd have again.

(And, yes, Winn is the same Kitty Winn who was the Carey Mulligan of her time back in the early 1970s when she stole "The Panic In Needle Park" from a young Al Pacino, starred in "The Exorcist" and played Ophelia to Stacy Keach's Hamlet on Broadway. She retired in the late 1970s to raise a family but clearly still has the chops.)

It may be that, as the play's run progresses, Marchetti and Winn will make the bittersweet "Last Romance" truly golden.

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'the last romance'

By Joe DiPietro

Through: Nov. 6

Where: San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo de San Antonio

Running time: 1 hour, 35 minutes

(one intermission)

Tickets: \$10-\$74, 408-367-7255,

www.sjrep.com