

'Dancing Lessons' at Lewiston's Public Theatre scores a 10

By Rob Tukey – Special to the Sun Journal
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The production, featuring an injured dancer and a scientist needing a dance lesson, is a 'joy to behold.'

Under promise and over deliver. It's an old marketing maxim.

And "Dancing Lessons," the current play by Mark St. Germain at The Public Theater in Lewiston, is stunning in its understatement of what to expect.

It is slyly described as a "romantic comedy." The press release simply promises a play about an injured professional dancer who is "thrown for a loop" when a geoscientist knocks on her door asking for a dance lesson.

The delivery of this common trope — two mismatched individuals thrown together and despite their differences ultimately fall in love — is deliberately vague. The MacGuffin in all this is "a dance lesson." In the theater, a MacGuffin is something that serves to set the plot in motion but has little or no intrinsic importance to the story.

Oh, but here is "Dancing Lessons." And over deliver it does! And oh, what dancing lessons — perhaps the MacGuffin of all MacGuffins.

When you think of "a romantic comedy," what comes to mind? Perhaps "It Happened One Night" or "Bringing Up Baby" or even "Cyrano de Bergerac"? How can a performance over deliver in comparison to Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert, Katharine Hepburn and Cary Grant, or the more contemporary Peter Dinklage and Haley Bennett.

The two fine actors in "Dancing Lessons," Suzannah Herschkowitz and Jed Peterson, bring a chemistry and consummate professionalism to this "duet" that makes their performance a joy to behold.

Directed by Janet Mitchko, Peterson as Ever Montgomery and Herschkowitz as Senga Quinn are absolutely spectacular as the "mismatched" partners. To say they are at opposite ends of the spectrum is no hyperbole.

Genius comes in many guises. Humor can be genius when used to inform and inspire rather than insult. It can ease us into understanding uncomfortable truths. Genius can also abide where it isn't easily recognized or readily acknowledged. Playwright St. Germain's dialogue uses humor gently and ingeniously to unveil and inform us to many truths. And delight us at the same time.

Herschkowitz and Peterson wring every drop of genius from their lines. Laughter, here, gives insight into complicated and diverse issues — from the ultimate demise of mankind to what defines "injured," from the sources of one's insecurity to how we recognize and accept true and honest friendship.

Truth and honesty can come wrapped in unusual packages, and in the eye of the beholder, bravery is beautiful.

The rapid and rich dialogue between the characters, Ever and Senga, is handled by the actors so effortlessly and convincingly that the 90 minutes fly by. Without intermission, I might add, but without any regret. Just plan



Suzannah Herschkowitz as Senga Quinn and Jed Peterson as Ever Montgomery in The Public Theatre's current production of "Dancing Lessons" in Lewiston.

accordingly. The ground they cover and the manner in which it is explored is the definition of “Dancing Lessons.” The dialogue becomes almost free verse rather than expository. The emotions of Ever and Senga invade us, as great theater should.

Herschkowitz’s Senga is an attractive, outwardly strong and independent young woman who has been suddenly and literally knocked from the ladder ascending to her dream. Other than her youthful desire to be Wonder Woman, she has only wanted and worked toward being a great dancer. Now, her physical vulnerability germinates a dormant emotional burden. Will she be able to return to dancing and, if not, how will she face that possibility?

Peterson’s Ever is at first an uncomfortable nuisance, an intrusion into Senga’s self-pitying isolation. But his nerdy persistence and ridiculously exorbitant offer of compensation for an hour of dance instruction bring Senga to a reluctant agreement that soon exposes a multitude of issues that stand in the way.

Herschkowitz and Peterson are thoroughly convincing in their roles. Moving seamlessly through their evolution from teacher/student to . . . well . . . you’ll see, they run the gamut of emotional turmoil and challenges arising from their disparate personalities.

Without revealing too much — discovering the depth of these characters is the wonder of this play — I will tease with this: Go see this play. It over delivers on every level. Most of all, the performances of Jed Peterson and Suzannah Herschkowitz are amazing and truly unforgettable. You will meet two individuals who move from possibly likeable to absolutely loveable in ways you might never have considered. You may ponder for yourself who truly is, in Ever’s words, “neurotypical.” Or if anyone is. Perhaps you’ll reconsider what defines an injury. With captivatingly entertaining and skilled acting, these true professionals present thought-provoking heady stuff with warmth, honesty and courage.

The entire production staff of “Dancing Lessons” also deserves acknowledgement. The choice of music, of course, plays a vital role when dance is involved, but more subtly than one might expect. Designer Amber Callahan’s set is primarily Senga’s city apartment: warm, homey, “lived in,” as Ever describes it. Anne Collins’ costumes are spot on, right down to the underwear. The lighting, by Heather Crocker, is beautifully highlighted in the fairy-tale finale. And Lisa Bragdon manages the stage deftly with the timing of numerous phone calls, YouTube visuals and fadeout scene changes seamlessly. “Dancing Lessons” is a stimulating and enjoyable production executed wonderfully on all fronts.