

Less talk, more love

Butte students elevate Mee's *Summertime*



One of *Summertime's* love triangles, from left: Frank (Bryce Corron), Maria (Florence Ives) and Francois (Jarrod Jackson).
PHOTO BY DAVIN SCHREINDL

For its spring production, the Butte

College Drama Department is featuring two plays on that most complicated of themes: love. And, with Charles Mee's *Summertime* and *Wintertime*—presented in rotating repertory—things are especially complicated.

Both plays revolve around the same characters in the same setting—a vacation beach house on Martha's Vineyard—but each obviously takes place at a different time of year.

I visited for a matinee of *Summertime* on Sunday (April 28) and upon entering the Black Box Theatre was impressed with designer Robert Pickering's ambitious set. An enormous molded beach with curved contours and staggered wood landings slopes down into the audience to form its own thrust stage. In the background, several large white birch trees extend nearly to the ceiling, and scattered about the scene sit a variety of outdoor couches and chairs, half-filled wine glasses, an acoustic guitar, and other summer-home miscellany.

The play opens with the arrival of James (David Loperena), a young man who has been directed to this house with hopes of hiring someone to translate the captions in a book of photographs from Italian to English. The first inhabitant he encounters is the young and beautiful Tessa (Devyn Cusick), and he's immediately smitten. After a few awkward and unrequited advances on James' part, a second man, Francois (Jarrod Jackson), enters the scene to music and literally sweeps Tessa off her feet.

Francois, it turns out, is the lover of Maria (Florence Ives), who is Tessa's mother, but his swash-buckling doesn't seem so scandalous when you consider that Maria is married to Frank (Bryce Corron), who has his own lover, Edmund (Ryan Shallenberger)—or that Francois also has been in a relationship with painter Mimi (Bailey Martin), who herself comes on to Tessa and is revisited by a past love, Natalie (Meghan Helms), who sneaks off for a rendezvous with the

neighbor boy, Gunter (Joseph Slupski).

This is the convoluted scenario that James has fallen into, and if it all sounds like a potentially volatile yet fun mix of seduction and betrayal, that's because, in one way, it is. Judged solely on the committed shenanigans of the courageous players (especially the charismatic Jackson), Butte's production does provide a lot of engaging screwball action, with plenty of physical comedy, melodramatic overreactions and impassioned pontifications on life and love. (One good example is a freakout scene led by Jackson, wherein he and other frustrated house guests thrash the set to the tune of Nirvana's "Stay Away.")

But Mee's dialogue is another matter. His characters don't converse so much as they monologue on the ideas behind human relationships, talking past each other and at the audience. While some of these scattered, loosely connected speeches might contain big ideas worth considering, they feel removed from the action at hand.

At the beginning of the play, Tessa is asked the same question she is at the end: "Do you believe in love at first sight?" Her answer changes, and while that might suggest a resolution of a story arc, there wasn't sufficient character interaction for the transformation to make any sense, much less be believable.

To be sure, Mee didn't intend for *Summertime* to be a neat, conventional narrative. In his directions in the script, he suggests, "There is not so much a set for a play, as an installation piece in which a performance occurs." His piece comes across a bit like a live art exhibit introducing a lot of ideas. I felt as though I was being read one artist statement after another, when all I wanted to do was to watch the characters and figure it out for myself.

Jesse Merz, who directs both productions, deserves credit for challenging his young actors with a non-traditional play like this. The source material might not have appealed to me (and for what it's worth, *Wintertime* seems to be more well-liked), but that doesn't mean a work by a prominent contemporary American playwright isn't a worthwhile piece of art to explore—for performers and audiences alike. □

by
Jason Cassidy

jasonc@
newsreview.com

On stage:

Wintertime (Thursday,
May 3, 7:30 p.m.
& Sunday, May
5, 2 p.m.) and
Summertime (Friday,
May 4, 7:30 p.m.).
Tickets: \$15
(\$10 students)

**Butte College
Black Box Theatre**
Arts Building
Butte College
3536 Campus Drive,
Oroville
butte.edu/drama

2019 SPRING BENEFITS FOR CLUBHOUSE
RESTORATION & SOLAR PANEL INSTALLATION

Chico Women's Club

SOLAR

SERIES BENEFIT FUNDRAISERS

Mothers' Day PLANT & Play- Sun May 12, 1-2:30 pm

Grandparents' PLANT & Play-Sun May 12, 3:30-5 pm

Women's Club Comedy Showcase, with
Chico Live Improv Comedy

& more great local women laugh-makers,
Delicious food by Tender Loving Coffee

Fri May 17, 7:30-10 pm

The CWC Disco Ball Maiden Voyage

with Chico Live Improv Comedy & Concert by
Scarlet Pumps featuring music from their new album &

Delicious food by Tender Loving Coffee

Fri May 31, 7:30-10 pm

Proudly co-sponsored by KZFR Community Radio,
Chico News & Review, Chico Live Improv Comedy,
Tender Loving Coffee, Scarlet Pumps

For Ticket Information Visit ChicoWomensClub.org



BLACK JOE LEWIS & THE HONEYBEARS W/ AMASA HINES

LIVE AT

THE BIG ROOM

THURSDAY, JUNE 6, 2019

SIERRA NEVADA BREWING CO.

1075 E. 20TH ST., CHICO. TICKETS ON SALE NOW! \$20 AVAILABLE IN
THE GIFT SHOP OR ONLINE AT WWW.SIERRANEVADA.COM/BIGROOM

f SierraNevadaBeer

@SierraNevada

@SierraNevadaChico