

Laugh therapy

Moonstruck
writer's
latest play
is 'joyfully
hilarious'



When John Patrick Shanley's romantic comedy *The Portuguese Kid* premiered off-Broadway in 2017, New York City

by
Robert Speer

Review:
The Portuguese Kid
shows Thursday-Saturday, 7:30 p.m.; Sunday, 2 p.m., through March 8. Tickets: \$12-\$16

Theatre on the Ridge
3735 Neal Road, Paradise 877-5760 tottr.org

critics lambasted it as all com and no rom. One called it “an underdeveloped doodle.” But audiences and reviewers outside the Big Apple loved it, saying it was joyfully hilarious. You can put the audience at Theatre on the Ridge’s current production—including this reviewer, who attended on Friday (Feb. 28)—squarely in the latter group. Shanley’s play is a joke-a-thon, and charges that it lacks depth fail to acknowledge that its nonstop banter is often funny as hell and comes at a time when humor is a welcome anodyne to current events (which, in fact, get occasional humorous mention in the play).

Shanley is best known as the author of the movie *Moonstruck*, the 1988 Oscar winner for Best Original Screenplay. He also has written numerous successful plays, including *Doubt: A Parable*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Drama and Tony

Award for Best Play in 2005, and later nominated for the Oscar for Best Adapted Screenplay in 2009.

With *The Portuguese Kid*, Shanley is again mining the comedic vein he unearthed in *Moonstruck*, which focused on a group of working class Brooklynites jockeying for position in the search for love.

The Portuguese Kid is set in Providence, Rhode Island. I’m not sure what kind of accent Providence residents have, but here—thanks to an excellent cast—the actors sound like characters out of *The Sopranos*, minus the hint of incipient violence. These people are comics, not killers.

Veteran actor/director (and TOTR artistic director) Jerry Miller helmed the production and also plays a key role as low-rent lawyer Barry Dragonetti. Miller seems incapable of a bad performance, and when he’s playing off an actor as skilled as his wife, Teresa Hurley-Miller, sparks fly.

Hurley-Miller plays Atalanta Lagana, a sexy and wealthy middle-aged widow (she’s buried two husbands) who consults her old friend Barry for help selling her mansion.

Atalanta carries a torch for Barry, as we learn when it’s revealed that she hollers his name while in the throes of sexual congress with her much younger boy toy, Freddie Imbrossi (Eric Ricketts). Shanley mines this quirk

Sparks fly between Barry Dragonetti (Jerry Miller) and Atalanta Lagana (Teresa Hurley-Miller) in *The Portuguese Kid*.

PHOTO BY JAY JAMES

for a truckload of laughs.

A familiar storyline emerges, one involving mismatched couples. It soon becomes obvious that Barry and Atalanta don’t yet realize that they are right for each other. Atalanta is too much woman for Freddie, and Barry is married to a sexy, sharp-tongued but much younger Puerto Rican model, Patty Dragonetti (the excellent Erika Anne Soerensen).

The only outlier to these romantic complexities is Fausta Dragonetti, Barry’s overbearing ogress of a mother (Judy Clemens, TOTR’s executive director). She loathes Atalanta and will do anything to keep her away from Barry, whom she calls a “sucker.” In one of the best lines in the play, she warns Atalanta to stay away from her son: “Take my advice. Get fat. Count your money. You’ve killed enough.”

In his director’s note in the playbill, Miller warns attendees, “Like an intricate mosaic, *The Portuguese Kid* is assembled from jagged shards and broken things all held together with a non-stop stream of profanity. So, as you read this, take heed and run if phrases like ‘Jump’n fuck’n cocksuckers’ are going to set your teeth on edge. That’s just the world our characters inhabit.” □

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