

Chester Theatre Company, Chester, MA

To the Moon and Back by Darcy Parker Bruce. Directed by Keira Naughton.

Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

“I made it up.”

“I love you to the moon and back is said between parents and children, romantic partners, friends, and even to pets,” reads a definition of use in the on-line slang dictionary. The full phrase has emerged as the title of books, films and even a choral work by John Adams where children sang it in response to the horrors of 9/11. Dolly Parton quoted it in one of her love songs. I recall Jackie Gleason’s character Ralph Cramden saying it as a threat to his wife Alice, played by Audrey Meadows in which love played no part. Now, in a world premiere play by Darcy Parker Bruce, commissioned for Chester Theatre Company, it takes on a resonance all its own when a young woman, living on the moon near her father who lives there also, comes to grips with childhood trauma and the dangers of parental love.



Raye Birk, Tara Franklin; Photo by Andrew Greto.

Reality for Ace, played with beautiful energy by Tara Franklin, is always in her sight, but not necessarily in her vision. Ace lives in a blue world, the moon’s surface where she is free to wander to take in the view of earth in the distance. She is outspoken, friendly with strangers and pleasant, if hostile, to Major who pleads with her to call him “Father” which she will not do. She dresses only in virginal white with a touch of moonlight silver. Her hair is beautifully brushed and her makeup is impeccable. She is an ideal, a young woman other young women would look up to as a role model. But for all her seeming perfection she is frightened. Though she hides it well, her friend RJ sees it. Their special friendship, cemented by fast-food burgers, reinforces her confidence.



Tara Franklin, Pauli Pontrelli;
Photo: Andrew Greto

RJ is handsomely played by Pauli Petrelli who has played on this stage three times before and always left their mark. They are stronger than ever in this imaginative role, a person who can show compassion for a woman in psychological difficulties without getting involved in the specifics of her trouble.

Ace, in her imaginative way, has brought RJ to her personal moon to provide her with a stalwart, someone she can safely love “to the moon and back.” RJ is the opposite of Major in every possible way. RJ is informally formal, undemanding and supportive, all sweetly presented in Petrelli’s performance.

Even so it is Major that Ace obsesses over. He is there for her most difficult moments, her challenges. He lounges in his beach chair, his Hawaiian shirt a symbol of his informality and his casual attitude toward life. Raye Birk takes the role of Major (call me Father) and he

witnesses her tribulations as she moves to examine this solitary environment they share. Birk is terrific. He exudes warmth that is never reciprocated and he never reacts negatively to her hard attitude. When she opens the door in their world he is genuinely interested in what she finds. And when he confesses his indiscreet abuse he is sadly moving.

Setting a story like this one in a fantasy world, an environment this special, falls to the designers of the show. The stunning set was designed by Travis George; the imaginative costumes by Charles Schoonmaker and the “earthlight” lighting design by Lara Dubin.

Nathan Leigh’s sound design and evocative music keeps the show in its fantastical reality. Keira Naughton has directed this new play with a strong sense of impossible reality which keeps it an interesting, real, and moving drama that just avoids potential melodrama. She has given us good theatre here.



Tara Franklin, Raye Birk; Photo: Andrew Greto

To the Moon and Back plays at the Chester Town Hall Theatre through August 21. For information and tickets call 413-354-7771 or go to www.chestertheatre.org.