

Berkshire Theatre Group, Stockbridge, MA

On Cedar Street, based on the novel “Our Souls at Night” by Kent Haruf.

Book by Emily Mann; Lyrics by Susan Birkenhead;
Music by Lucy Simon and Carmel Dean with Deborah Abramson
Choreography by Terry Berliner. Directed by Susan H, Schulman.
Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman

“I don’t care what they think!”

Playwright Emily Mann has constructed a non-traditional musical from a complex novel set in a small town in Colorado. With a score by Lucy Simon (her last) and Carmel Dean, with simple lyrics by Susan Birkenhead, two seniors, Addie Moore and Louis Waters, neighbors who have not been friends, create an odd relationship that ultimately blossoms into true and deepset love. Both widowed they agree to an arrangement guaranteed to provide them both much needed sleep. As they get to know one another their interest in the future alters into something combined, a surprise to Addie but not necessarily to Louis. Sharing a bed is her idea; romance is his.



Laura Ward as Addie and Stephen Bogardus as Louis; Photo: David Dashiell

Stephen Bogardus plays Louis Waters. He employs natural charm to bring this man to life. There is nothing forced or artificial or actory in his performance and the result is an audience belief that he is the man he plays. He is that easy and natural in the role. His songs are mellow, ballad-like tunes, some accompanied by the actor on a guitar. They are revelatory with lines like: WASN'T GONNA TELL YA MORE THAN WHAT YOU KNEW//DON'T KNOW WHAT IT'S GOT TO DO WITH ME AND YOU in the best song in the show *Honey in the Devil's Song* in which he reveals his past mistakes.



Lana Gordon, Stephen Bogardus, Hayden Hoffman, Laura Ward; Photo: David Dashiell

He is one of two leading men in the show; the other a young boy, Addie's grandson, Jamie, whose emotional needs are even greater than those of Louis or Jamie's grandmother. Jamie is nicely played by Hayden Hoffman, a local actor with previous experience with BTG.

Lauren Ward is a beautiful actor and singer, a perfect Addie for this production. She has a gentleness and a grace that moves her character out of the literature and into reality. We feel her

difficulties and her problems with her son, Gene, and his self-imposed sense of guilt, well played by Ben Roseberry. His selfishness is overwhelming. There are at least three moments in the show where Ward's Addie moved the audience to tears.

The rest of the acting company deliver their roles ideally. Lenny Wolpe plays an annoying neighbor, political and polemical, and Dan Teixeira plays his annoying but benevolent son. Ruth, the militant neighbor is played beautifully by Lana Gordon who sings, narrates and acts with equal success,



Lenny Wolpe, Dan Teixeira; Photo: David Dashiell

never losing her spot in the plot or overwhelming the rest of the company, and Charley, the dog, is played to perfection by Addison, another of Bill Berloni's animal actors (You cannot do "Annie" without Berloni.). Three musicians play the score under Kristin Stowell's direction.

Plays about elderly lovers can be difficult for audiences but the packed house at the Unicorn went with the show without difficulty. That is due, in part, to the writing. Playwright Emily Mann has used the simplest language for her characters making them essentially realistic



Ben Roseberry, Laura Ward; Photo: David Dsshiell

and very human; they become real people for us and that's just great. There was never a moment when any of the characters felt acted; instead we were treated to moments in reality transposed to the stage. And with singing involved, that is a true accomplishment.

Director Susan H. Schulman has had the good fortune to work here with a creative set designer, Reid Thompson, who has created a large, moveable set that allows the show to move quickly, almost filmically, from place to place and never loses its intrinsic beauty. Alex Allison has given the company appropriate

costumes (although Ward's outfits are from another era) and lighting designer Alan C. Edwards has contributed the kind of lighting that allows a musical to flow from moment to moment. There are also incredible projections by designer Shawn Edward Boyle whose work in the final sequences of the play make pure magic into perfect reality. Schulman has let her team take her company through their difficult lives without flinching, without intruding.

This is a very good show on its way to being a great show. Chances are very good that it will get there. And as a World Premiere, we have it first. That's terrific!

+ 08/20/2023 +

On Cedar Street plays on the Larry Vaber Stage at The Berkshire Theatre Group's Unicorn Theater on Route 7 in Stockbridge, MA through September 2. For information and tickets go to berkshiretheatregroup.org or call 413-997-4444.

