

Majestic Theater, West Springfield, MA

The Ladyslipper by Danny Eaton. Directed by James Warwick.

Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman

“We’ll meet again, don’t know where, don’t know when. . .”

Fate’s funny turns, it seems, alter lives without determining to do so. At least that is the theme of Danny Eaton’s latest play, “The Ladyslipper” now on stage at the Majestic Theater in West Springfield, Massachusetts. The play’s title refers to a bar inn in a rural town somewhere in America which becomes the home of an English lass, born in this place, who has been living on an island off the coast of Spain. She is an exotic addition to this place, and therefore, most attractive to a variety of folks. Her birth mother has recently died leaving the bar and the building to her never-seen child who arrives expecting to meet the lawyer who traced her existence. When they do meet, magic ensues. That’s the play, or is it really. There is so much more as revelation after discovery keeps happening in what may be Eaton’s best work.



Mark Dean, Jay Sefton; Photo: Kait Rankins

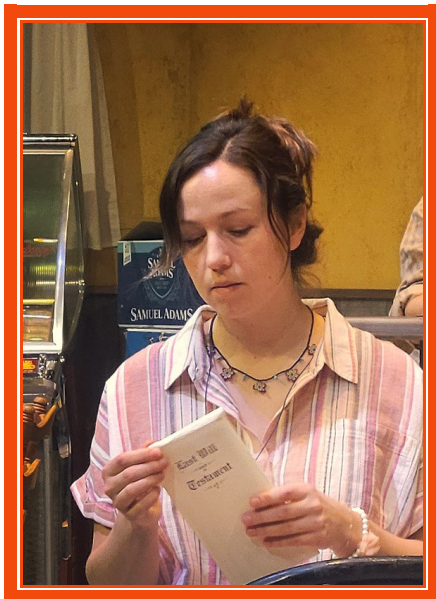
The two middle-aged men who run The Ladyslipper are Hank and Jebb, played superbly by Jay Sefton and Mark Dean. Their lives have been disturbed by the death of the owner, Ruth, whose ashes sit on a shelf that should carry scotch and bourbon. Later in the play they are done in once again by her bequests to them. They want to appreciate her birth child, Lana (pronounced “Layna”) and she does her best to make it easy for them by being the most provocative woman possible. She succeeds and they become her champions in a classical manner; all they need is armor and lances to saddle up and defend her, she who needs no such defence.

Equally disturbed and delighted are Trish and Jimmy, a young couple engaged to be married whose lives together are turned inside out by Lana. Trish is played warmly, with life, by Chelsie Nectow. Jimmy is delivered whole and impactfully by Robbie Simpson. Their scenes together are wonderful and cover a range of emotions not usually entrusted to very youthful actors. They deliver everything playwright Eaton could hope for.



Madeleine Maggio, Chelsie Nectow;
Photo: Kait Rankins

Lana is played by Madeleine Maggio who brings both beauty and a scintillating sense of mystery to her role. Lana has a devastating past, having spent only a few moments with her actual American mother and a plethora of years with adoptive British parents before moving on her own to her Mediterranean island. She is a totally independent creature whose self-confidence, as much as her beauty, proves to be attractive to the others. She speaks her mind and holds back very little which startles the others, and yet when it comes to her emotional attractions she is reticent to allow her true nature to be easily exposed. Reading a letter left for her by her real mother she gives us the words but not the true content and yet, in Maggio's delivery of the words, she finds a way to express the dead woman's deepest meaning. This is typical of her performance from beginning to end.



Madeleine Maggio;
Photo: Kait Rankins

Ruth's best friend, and Trish's mother, Estelle, is played with both heart and soul by Cate Damon. Easily accepting the woman whom she held in her arms for a half minute at birth, she was both moving and solidly played. Later, accepting her daughter's dangerous choices she was oddly realistic in an unhappy situation. Damon gives with impact a mother's outstretched arms in order to settle a difficult score and it is only in the final scene of the play that her heart at last is open to the unusual circumstances that surround her.

Director James Warwick has used the best aspects of each actor to delve into the depths of each character. This play, in his hands, is a truly living and vivid experience. There is no question that every moment is exactly what it should be; no emotion is overlooked, no action is out-of-place. It would help, however, if the two young actresses

would speak up throughout the play. Their projection skills are not reliable. Warwick's work

delivers both physical and emotional sensations. He is fortunate to have had a perfect company of players to work with in this very perfect play.

He is ably assisted by a design team that makes the show a showplace. Daniel D. Rist's set is as honest as a set can be and is beautiful to witness, although all it is, really, is a bar that is temporarily closed to the public. His lighting design echoes his set work perfectly. People and spaces exist because he brings them into a staged reality that improves with his design. The only moment that I would question is the departure of people for the wedding, as they exited into a dark world that was oddly unwelcoming.



Madeleine Maggio, Robbie Simpson, Chelsea Nectow; Photo: Kait Rankins

Costume designer Dawn McKay has done a lot in creating the characters. Lana dresses in a manner that is quite unusual to the inhabitants of this rural town. Trish is as simple yet structured as a woman in her profession could be and Jimmy is as casual and semi-formal as a man who loves fishing could be in such a place. The bartender and cook are exactly right and Estelle shows us her early years and her current years simultaneously.

This is a play worth seeing. As traditional as a love story ever gets, it is also an unusual look at our modern times in a world devoted to the past. Eaton and Warwick have created a mini-masterpiece and even though the end of Act One indicates an almost inevitable direction the Second Act pulls off surprises that delight the audience. It's a great way to make winter into summer over-night.

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The Ladyslipper plays at the Majestic Theater, 131 Elm Street, West Springfield, MA through March 24. For information and tickets call the box office at (413) 747-7797 or go to their website at www.majestictheater.com.