

Ghent Playhouse, Ghent, NY

The Bridges of Madison County, based on the novel by Robert James Waller,

Book by Marsha Norman, Music and Lyrics by Jason Robert Brown..

Directed by Miichael McDermott & Michael C. Mensching. Music Direction by Ellen Rizzo.

Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

“Who we are and who we want to be.”

When two people meet who are destined to be a couple, bells ring, light shatters illusions, music ripples from the heavens. Francesca Johnson, an immigrant wife and mother from Naples and Robert Kincaid, a magazine photographer are two such people and when they meet in Winterset, Madison County, Iowa their mutual magnetism is unflaggable. She is a sensuous, Italian and he is a ruggedly handsome Easterner with miles of charm exuding from his body. They seem destined from the start of their story to be one of those legendary couples who inspire great art. This show, with its doomed Juliet and Romeo, never reaches those romantic heights.



TracyLinn Conner, Amelia Scheriff, Carlos Vasquez,Chelsea Beatty, Choristers;
Photo: John Shea

Francesca married her second love, an American soldier named Bud. She left behind her sister Chiara and their family, transplanting herself in Iowa and raising a family of her own. She has been content with her life. It has been a decent life. Then she meets Robert and nothing is ever the same for her, emotionally. Like a classic Juliet she is caught in a love match that can only bring her pain and grief, although it initially brings her a boundless joy. That joy is bordered with the pain of betrayal and the fear of discovery, however.



Will Heatley (l), TracyLinn Conner (r);
Photo: John Shea



Jeffrey Jene, Carlos Vasquez, Amelia Scheriff;
Photo: John Shea

little to hold on to. It is lush, long and loud but it is not melodic and memorable. You probably will not leave the Ghent Playhouse humming the songs. They are integral to the experience but they do not stand out as more than sung underscore. The one exception is “Falling Into You” which ends the first act. However less than half a day later I can’t recall the tune.

The show isn’t just these five people. The ensemble is strong and their characters drift in and out much as they would in life. Two other players deliver beautiful performances that are definitely memorable (even if their songs are not). Katie Snyder as the State Fair Singer give a delicious rendition of “State Road 21” and the performance by Chelsea Beatty of “Get Closer” and other musical moments will not easily be forgotten.

This show moves around from place to place often and the set design by Michael Okeeffe takes us on a screen cycle trip that mirrors Francesca’s affair with Robert. It is quick, dynamic, and loving. The directors of the show Michael McDermott and Michael C. Menshing have done double duty as the projection designers and these pictures illuminate the show’s inner heart. Kassidi Jarvis has done excellent work designing the show’s lighting and Joanne Maurer and Karin Mason have costumed the show well, moving us through time and the tale perfectly.

The family Johnson are all well-played by Jeffrey Jene, Carlos Vasquez and Amelia Scheriff. Jene actually makes it hard to understand Francesca’s betrayal of their love. Not a Romeo, certainly, but a good man on his own, his Bud has a charm that is unmistakable. Daughter Carolyn is a teen-age handful and Scheriff plays her as a terrifying young beauty who can easily overwhelm even her mother. Vasquez gives a highly sensitive performance of a boy aiming himself at manhood but still not ready for the task. They all sing well and act even better. They are keys to the kingdom of Francesca’s difficult loneliness.

What holds them all together in this show is the music. There is a lot of music. It almost never stops but when it does there is the acting. Sadly, the music gives us very



Will Heatley, TracyLinn Conner; Photo: John Shea



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While Conner and Heatley won't make you forget Meryll Street and Clint Eastwood, they will leave a lasting impression on your soul and your mind. Their work is that good. Thanks to their talent, and the work of directors McDermott and Mensching, the underplaying and overplaying of moments in this show will stay with you for quite a while. I cannot say I loved the show, but I did love the people in it. A very talented company with excellent leading players and superb production skills can make an experience such as this one into an affair to remember. And that is

what the Ghent Playhouse has delivered this season. Try to see it and decide for yourself if you get your moneys-worth. I think you ultimately will say "yes" and you'll be glad.

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The Bridges of Madison County plays at the Ghent Playhouse, 6 Town Hall Place, Ghent, New York through April 28. For information and tickets go to their website at www.ghentplayhouse.org or call 518.392.6264.