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 ARTS+ENTERTAINMENT



LIZ LAUREN

Solea Pfeiffer, left, and Renée Fleming play a mother and daughter on an Italian vacation in "The Light in the Piazza" at the Lyric Opera House.

**IN PERFORMANCE** 'The Light in the Piazza' ★★★★★

# An exquisite 'Piazza'

Lyric Opera production starring Renée Fleming is romantic perfection

BY CHRIS JONES

Its long-lined melodies often seeming to reach for the heavens, Adam Guettel's "The Light in the Piazza" is the most soul-satisfying score written for Broadway so far this century. (Seriously, what's the competition, naysayers? Jukeboxes and pop pastiche?) At present, you can hear its dulcet, me-

lodious, romantic tones in Chicago, much of it sung by Renée Fleming, no less, and played by an orchestra formidably larger than at the 2005 production at the Lincoln Center.

And unlike the time the national tour of this gorgeous composition played the Auditorium Theatre, the sound reinforcement quality at the Lyric Opera House

is superb.

So what have you got going on this holiday season that would prevent you from partaking for one night? Some torturous party with 93.9 FM, all Christmas bonhomie, all the time? Please. Take a night off. Ponder some deeper questions of the heart with someone you love.

If the show is not familiar,

despite its origins at the Goodman Theatre in 2004, know that "Piazza" is based on a 1960 novella by Elizabeth Spencer, as published in *The New Yorker*. The story, set in that era, follows Margaret Johnson (Fleming), a North Carolina mother on a grand Italian tour with her daughter, Clara (Solea Pfeiffer). A young Italian man, Fabrizio (Rob Houchen), becomes

enamored with Clara, which presents Johnson, whose own marriage has failed emotionally, with a dilemma. Clara, we come to see, has suffered trauma in her childhood and thus is not all she first seems; her mother's question, and the show's main concern, is whether to protect her, and the

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MICHELLE REID

Deeply Rooted dancers perform a pared-down version of Gary Abbott's "Parallel Lives" at the Logan Center.

**IN PERFORMANCE**

# Deeply Rooted offers new works, refreshed revivals

BY LAUREN WARNECKE

"There aren't too many more firsts for me," said Nicole Clarke-Springer, reflecting on a career with Deeply Rooted Dance Theater that began in 1996. Ironically, Friday was full of firsts as she said this in her first curtain speech as the newly appointed artistic director of the company.

That nothing appeared remarkably different is a testament to the resilience and malleability of this company, whose founders, Gary Abbott and Kevin Iega Jeff, remain involved. Long-time company member Joshua L. Ishmon moves into Clarke-Springer's former role as rehearsal director. Despite new company members, a new managing director (Jackie Robinson) and works newly excavated from the archives, this weekend's concert, through Sunday at the Logan Center, feels very much like the same old Deeply Rooted.

Friday opened with recent repertoire from Abbott, Ishmon and Clarke-Springer, while the back half of the program focused on decades-old revivals. (Two programs Saturday and Sunday were ordered slightly differently and included a preview of a new work not seen Friday.) In a pared-down version of Abbott's "Parallel Lives," Abbott alternates between recognizable gestures and powerful

phrases, blending sharp African-influenced pulses of the torso and arms with balletic lines and modern dance floorwork. Each gesture — an arm held to the lower back, a wave of the hand, a monocle-like forefinger and thumb (like an "OK" sign) held to the eye, and later, away from the body — could be interpreted any number of ways. But to this critic, "Parallel Lives" portrays the fierceness of women and the labor of their everyday lives.

Ishmon's "When Men ..." explores facets of masculinity, as three shirtless men — Pierre Clark, Ricky Davis and Nehemiah Spencer — oscillate between stoic gestures of defiance and protest, union dancing and tender partnering, supporting, almost caressing, one another.

"Forces," by Clarke-Springer, premiered last year, and after marinating for a season looks even better than before. The quartet features dancer Briana Arthur, who has recently been doing double-duty dancing for DRDT and Cerqua Rivera Dance Theatre. Arthur's flawless technique and warm, inviting stage presence are fully maximized in this, the most balletic piece of the night, which asks a lot of her and the rest of the cast. Rebekah Kuczma, Trey Johnson and Spencer are no less vital to

the success of the piece, lifting and framing Arthur, but also carving their own gorgeous patterns about the stage.

Two one-act ballets, by Jeff and Martial Roumain, choreographed a decade apart, are the evening's throwbacks. It's not a new strategy for this company to refresh older works, revitalizing the designs with fresh costumes and new lighting (by Sarah Lackner). Placing vintage works beside new ones can be hit-or-miss, and some of Deeply Rooted's revivals show their age.

Not so, here; though it's quite clear that Roumain's "Essence: A Portrait of Four Women" (1972) and Jeff's "Dedication" (1982) aren't new, they aren't relics, either, and pulse with the same currency I presume they had at the time they premiered.

Pierre Clark portrays an elder, dressed in an Egyptian-inspired collar and skirt, for "Dedication," which loosely follows the Bible story of Genesis as Clark bestows life, light and land unto his "children." And then the stage becomes a playground for the company to rollick and romp, showcasing phrase-work that's not too vintage, but clearly a product of Jeff's early influences: the techniques of Martha Graham and Lester Horton — apparently easy for this group of excellent dancers. (It's not.)

Especially poignant is Roumain's quartet for Nyemah Stuart, Kuczma, Dominique Atwood and Marlayna Locklear, each capturing a distinct persona in long solos set to music by Nina Simone, Zulema and Roberta Flack. One could see these figures as four individuals — one sweet, one sultry, one seductive, one sizzling. Or, dressed in white, black, green and red, they are perhaps four facets of the same woman, representing the chakras or maybe the elements: air, water, earth, fire. Or maybe not. In the end, a crackly recording — presumably a reconstruction from an LP — played a recitation of "The Great Pax Whitie" by Nikki Giovanni, accompanied by the James Cleveland Choir. As the four women moved together, very clearly locating this piece within the ethos of racial equality as the poem makes abstract references to historical American civil rights leaders, the women link arms, a united front walking together toward the edge of the stage.

"And my lord, ain't we never gonna see the light," Giovanni says. "The rumblings of this peace must be stilled be stilled be still. Ahh Black people, ain't we got no pride?"

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## 'Piazza'

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vulnerable Italian family she would be joining, from potential battering by life's headwinds, or allow her a chance at romantic happiness that may well not come again.

You don't have to be on vacation in Italy to relate. The show's book, by Craig Lucas, homes in on the central questions of parenting, specifically the clash between offering freedom and preventing catastrophe. It doesn't matter if you have a newborn or a college kid; you'll get that. And, on a deeper level, it explores the question of a sensual awakening, positing sun-kissed Italy as a kind of redemptive force for sad-sack American Puritanism (something we well understand in December in Chicago).

"These are very popular in Italy," sings Clara, confronting a statue. "It's the land of naked marble boys. Something we don't see a lot in Winston-Salem. That's the land of purple corduroys."

I don't remember the word "purple" from my oft-played original cast recording, which brings me to the next issue, of particular interest to Guettel and "Piazza" fans: Does this new production, directed by Daniel Evans, bring something fresh to the town square? Can it compete with Bart Sher's original and justly acclaimed staging?

Yes. Take it to a small Broadway house, say I. There are simple but compelling new ideas here. And, despite the venue, a renewed intimacy.

If you know Victoria Clark's Tony Award-winning performance as Margaret, you'll find Fleming quite different. Clark's Margaret was more dominant in the narrative, more focused on worrying about Clara; Fleming takes a different tack, forging a more insecure character whose natural inclination is to set her daughter free and yet who fears that both generations of women are lost in a mist of confusion. Fleming is, of course, also a very different kind of singer, and her presence also emphasizes the intentional clash of styles in Guettel's work between the vocal conventions of one wartime generation (the excellent British actor Alex Jennings is on hand as Signor Naccarelli, Fabrizio's very involved father), and the jazzier experimentation of their children, enjoying the dividends of a new post-war freedom.

There are other fascinating adjustments: Houchen

When: Through Dec. 29

Where: Lyric Opera House, 20 N. Wacker Drive

Running time: 2 hours, 30 minutes

Tickets: \$35-\$219 at 312-827-5600 or [www.lyricopera.org/light](http://www.lyricopera.org/light)

is a tenor, not the expected baritone, and his performance matches that of Pfeiffer, in a very sweet and lovely way. It's crucial in a musical romance that you pull for this naive couple, and, indeed, you most certainly do. Pfeiffer, a free-voiced soprano, has much of Audrey Hepburn's retro sense of glamor, and this interpretation of Clara also is quite different. It's less emotionally intense than from either Celia Keenan-Bolger or Kelli O'Hara, both of whom played this role with astonishing levels of detail, but its blend of fear and utter determination works beautifully with what Evans is, I think, trying to do.

In other words, the show has four very strong leads.

Robert Jones has not forged a great design — although, in fairness, this rotund, cropped set was originally created for a concert hall and had to be scaled up for Lyric's huge proscenium (this is technically a rental by a company called Scenario Two Limited, although Lyric artists, from Fleming to the orchestra, are all over the show and the house Saturday night was filled with Lyric subscribers).

Note also that Evans' staging has a few visual jitters and abrupt transitions, when the pervasive metaphor of the work always is fluidity, albeit buffeted by changing breezes. But I mean those comments as minor criticisms: Evans gets the emotional key of this exquisite piece of theater precisely right. And the show was very ably cast. Exceptionally so.

On Broadway, Guettel is famous for having a limited output. He is at work on another show, a musical version of "The Days of Wine and Roses," for which I cannot wait, especially since that feels like material that will suit his gifts. Thankfully, the period before there is more to enjoy from this musical genius, "Piazza" is still very much alive and, in this staging, as vital as ever. What is more appealing at the theater than hope-filled complexity with notes that seem to ricochet through your own life?

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