

## ENTERTAINMENT

## SUMMER IN DECEMBER

Powerful, poignant  
Renee Fleming  
brightens 'The  
Light in the Piazza'

BY KYLE MACMILLAN  
For the Sun-Times

Although the action takes place under the summer blaze of the Tuscan sun, "The Light in the Piazza" proved Saturday evening to be ideal holiday fare with its transporting, not-too-heavy story and bright, captivating score.

The Tony Award-winning musical has begun a 10-performance run at the Lyric Opera House but not under the auspices of Lyric Opera of Chicago. Instead, it is presented by Karl Sydow and the British production company Scenario Two, a team that oversaw previous iterations this year in London and Los Angeles.

The show is not exactly bold or revolutionary in its structure or storytelling, qualities that were clearly never the intent of Craig Lucas, who conceived the book, or Adam Guettel, who wrote the music and lyrics.

Instead, the two set out to create an adaptation of Elizabeth Spencer's 1960 novella of the same title that was emotionally compelling and unabashedly romantic, and it succeeds on both fronts in spades.

The big danger here was sinking into treacle, something the creators manage to avoid by carefully balancing the musical's heartwarming wit and effervescence with needed layers of dramatic complexity and tinges of darkness.

"The Light in the Piazza" revolves around a North Carolina mother, Margaret Johnson, and her 26-year-old daughter, Clara, who take a summer trip to Italy in 1958. What was meant to be a simple getaway excursion turns into something much more transformative for both of them.

Clara falls in love with a local,



Clara (Solea Pfeiffer) and her mother, Margaret (Renee Fleming), visit Italy in "The Light in the Piazza." LIZ LAUREN

Fabrizio Naccarelli, a relationship that Margaret tries desperately to squelch because her daughter has certain mental and emotional disabilities as the result of a childhood accident.

And as Clara grows up and comes out of her shell as never before in Italy, Margaret is forced to face her overprotectiveness of the budding young woman and to come to terms with her own loveless marriage that had its ill-fated beginnings in the same places the two are visiting.

Suffusing and supporting everything is Guettel's enchanting score, with its soaring strings, cascading harp and strains of mandolin and guitar that give the

### 'THE LIGHT IN THE PIAZZA'

★★★ 1/2

When: To Dec. 29

Where: Lyric Opera House, 20 N. Wacker

Tickets: \$35-\$219

Info: (312) 827-5600 or [lightinthepiazza.themusical.com](http://lightinthepiazza.themusical.com)

music an idiomatic, local flavor and add to its romantic allure.

It is no accident that this musical is being presented in an opera house, because the score operates in a fascinating realm between opera and musical, with the three roles of Margaret and Fabrizio's

parents written for classically trained voices.

The score is handsomely performed here by a subset of the fine Lyric Opera Orchestra under conductor Kimberly Grigsby, a 30-member pit ensemble that is much closer to the size used in operas than typical Broadway musicals.

As would be expected, director Daniel Evans takes a conventional approach to the staging, doing a capable job of shaping the characters and highlighting the show's gentle humor. He also makes the most of the 10-member supporting cast to project a vibrant sense of street life as they take on different classic types from a priest

and nuns to a tour guide and café servers.

The striking scenery consists of a stationary, multilevel half-circle set with a sweeping staircase and fragments of doorways and columns evoking Florence's street facades. Hanging slightly at an angle above is a disc with clouds painted on it, suggesting the many ceilings in historic buildings in Italy with just such effects.

Although this musical is no stranger to Chicago, where it was developed in part at the Goodman Theatre in early 2004, this production has an ingredient that sets it apart from any others: famed operatic soprano Renée Fleming as Margaret.

As would be expected, Fleming handles her singing with aplomb, especially Margaret's final defiant solo, "Fable." But more impressive is her first-rate acting and magnetic stage presence, as she brings a sense of authenticity and poignant vulnerability to this role to which she so clearly feels an affinity.

Rob Houchen grabs the lovestruck character of Fabrizio and makes the most of it, with his bounding energy and vivacity and big, vibrant voice. He is nicely matched by Solea Pfeiffer, who convincingly conveys both Clara's childlike innocence and newfound sense of freedom and brings her winningly classic Broadway stylizations to the show's anthem-like title song. Together, they exude a believable chemistry and light up love duets like "Say It Somehow."

The rest of this well-chosen cast is strong as well, especially Alex Jennings (of Netflix's "The Crown") as Fabrizio's affable father, Signor Naccarelli, who also has to make a transformation or two, and Eric Sciotto as his fiery, showy brother, Giuseppe.

A summer love story in December? Absolutely, and "The Light in the Piazza" is just the ticket.

Kyle MacMillan is a Chicago freelance writer.