

Ocean State Theatre Company Is Breaking Legs



“Break a leg” is a phrase actors use to wish each other luck before taking the stage. But, in Ocean State Theatre Company’s production of Tom Dulack’s dark comedy *Breaking Legs*, it takes on a whole new meaning when a playwright turns to members of organized crime to fund his new play.

Directed by RI favorite Fred Sullivan, his OSTC directorial debut, the play falls short of its “hilarious” billing. Though the pace and laughs increase markedly in Act II, it is not enough to make up for Act I where the laughs are few and far between. The problem is that this genre represents some very well-traversed terrain, both dramatically and comically, making it difficult to present something original.

Much of the humor comes across as predictable and cliché: course language, Italians shouting at each other rather than talking and a table always covered in food. Dulack has not given us anything new to sink our funny bone into. Consequently, the cast is tasked with making the material seem fresh and funny, which they achieve with varying degrees of success.

All the action occurs in an Italian restaurant owned by Lou Graziano and managed by his single and very available daughter Angie. Once again, OSTC’s set designers have done a fantastic job perfectly replicating a private dining area in an Italian restaurant featuring four tables covered with red and white tablecloths, a jukebox that plays nothing but Italian music, a fully stocked bar (courtesy of the Greenwood Inn) and pictures of Italian maps covering the back wall.

Anxious to find his daughter a husband, Lou excitedly awaits the arrival of playwright Terence O’Keefe, one of Angie’s former college professors. In addition to hearing about his new play, he hopes the 40-something and married professor will become a love interest for his head strong daughter who just happens to have “a hard-on” for him.

Upon meeting with his potential investors, O’Keefe quickly realizes the Graziano family “uncles” are perhaps a bit more “family” than he has bargained for. But the lure of quick, easy cash — “Two hundred thousand doesn’t sound like much,” concludes Lou. “It doesn’t?” asks a shocked O’Keefe — stops him

from aborting his plans. Things become even more complicated after he witnesses the murder of the debt-ridden “uncle” Frankie.

Then there is also the competing story-line of the budding romance between Angie and O’Keefe, with his arrival dredging up all sorts of repressed emotions. He whimsically recalls one of her first writing samples: “Oh that story about when I first did it,” she interjects. “Did that turn you on?” After several aggressive advances from Angie, and a near orgasmic foot massage, we learn the professor is actually separated from his wife and not very happy with his lot in life. In one of the play’s funnier scenes, he crawls across the floor lamenting how awful his life is crying, “I have been an English teacher for a quarter century!”

Angie and O’Keefe ultimately consummate their relationship on a bed in Angie’s office that she assures him is only “slightly used.” Then, in a highly implausible twist, he bullies the uncles into lending him the money to produce his play; though he is slightly put off-guard when Lou hands him \$90,000 cash.

Despite the play’s challenges regarding its well-worn material, there are some fine moments, most notably the performance of Lincoln native Chris Perrotti (Tino De Felice). As mob boss Mike Francisco’s muscle and consigliere, Perrotti serves up many funny one-liners and often helps Francisco complete a sentence. His entrance wearing a velour sweatsuit, gold chain and white sneakers is probably a familiar sight for many Rhode Islanders!

Brandon Whitehead’s (Mike Francisco) performance is loud and sometimes over-the-top, but it grows on you. His inability to open his lips when laughing becomes an ongoing gag that actually gets funnier throughout the play.

OSTC veteran Chris Swan ably portrays the professor-turned-playwright Terence O’Keefe. But his role suffers the most from the script; he comes off as far too skittish, making his tough guy conversion a bit far-fetched. There are often several lengthy stretches in Act I where just sits without talking or interacting with anybody.

Providence native Sophia Blum does wonders for leopard print and a collection of tacky skintight dresses as the sex-starved Angie. She does an okay job of balancing Angie’s strong-will with her desperate need for love. As her father Lou, Cleo Zani nicely combines his overly protective love and desire for what’s best for his daughter with his dark side.

Mark S. Cartier appears briefly delivering one of the most convincing performance as the pathetic uncle Frankie begging for “a couple more weeks” to pay off his debt.

OSTC’s production of *Breaking Legs* runs through February 14 at the company’s Jefferson Boulevard theater. For tickets or more information, visit oceanstatetheatre.org.