

Counter-Productions Brings The Green Fairy to the Stage



In 1914, absinthe was officially banned in France, ending an era (albeit a short one) and creating a legend surrounding the milky green liquid that supposedly fostered creativity, hallucinations and madness. The only true part of that legend, of course, was the fact that the spirit was erroneously made illegal in many countries for about 100 years, but absinthe was and is simply a licoricey alcoholic beverage that has since been reinstated (and subsequently ignored). What helped make absinthe so popular in its heyday was the ritual and paraphernalia surrounding the highly potent beverage. While it is true that all sectors of society enjoyed sipping on a nice absinthe as the sun set over Paris, the drink became highly associated with artists and bohemians. Creative luminaries, including Van Gogh and Toulouse-Lautrec, extolled the virtues of the Green Fairy in overblown hyperbole that aided in the perception of absinthe as fuel for creative madness. Of course, if you drink enough of anything for an extended period, you'll go off the deep end, but there is something to be said for the contemplative state of mind that results from carefully preparing the drink and then finally taking that first cold sip. A creative personality with an open mind can be inspired by almost anything, but being in the right place at the right time and in the right frame of mind can open the right person up to inspiration that can change the world.

This notion is explored in a lighthearted, but surprisingly weighty fashion by comedian Steve Martin in his *Picasso at the Lapin Agile*, currently presented by Counter-Productions Theatre at AS220's 95 Empire black box. In a conceit that seems to come naturally to Martin, but might draw raised eyebrows for another writer, we are in the Lapin Agile (literally "nimble rabbit") in 1904, presented with a ribald cast of characters that seamlessly include Pablo Picasso and Albert Einstein. The two provide much fodder for a spirited debate on the nature of Art and Science and the creative intersection between the two at the dawn of the 20th Century. Director Rufus Teixeira has assembled a facile and funny cast anchored around the Lapin Agile's proprietor, Freddy (CP's Artistic Director Ted Clement) and his girlfriend/hostess, Germaine (a simply wonderful Valerie Remillard Myette). Clement delivers a masterclass here of technical ability down to his perfect French accent and dignified simplicity. Clement also serves as Scenic Designer and we first meet him just prior to the start of the show, walking the space he created and prepping the bar for another day of service while appropriately Belle Époque ditties glide tunefully in the background. One by one we are introduced to a motley set of characters who are entreated by Freddy not to enter out of the order of the program in one of Martin's many departures into self-awareness that occur right up until the final line of the play. We soon meet Geoff Leatham's Gaston, an aging rake who cannot get his mind away from women, sex and scatological

references. Leatham oozes a putrid charm and looks as if he smells like a creepy uncle's cologne and mostly serves to act as a springboard for many of Martin's potent one-liners. Stevie Smith's over-the-top Charles Dabernow Schmendiman represents commercialism and a crass Americanism that attempts to infiltrate the wonderment expressed in the achievements that Picasso and Einstein embody (whether intentional or not, his character ends up chugging absinthe straight from the bottle, perverting the subtle designs of the spirit in effort for more, more, more). A more subtle subterfuge of creativity is Erin Archer's brassy, ebullient Sagot, an art dealer who confesses to gouging the price of her clients' work while evidently knowing little about their inherent value. Colleen Farrell gamely delivers two different women — the naïve, spirited Suzanne and the supposedly more worldly-wise Countess, but fails to match the same level of performance as some of her castmates. Audrey Crawley has a brief but fun turn as a female admirer who is really just another of Martin's punch lines, but we should all be so lucky. It is, of course, Picasso and Einstein who consume everyone's attention and the well-rehearsed and finely tuned pacing make up for what are fairly basic performances by Jeff Ararat and Steven Zailskas. They both look wonderful (as does everyone else, thanks to some wonderful design work by Laura Minadeo), particularly Zailskas, whose unruly hair springs into the familiar Einstein halo on demand. The two verbally spar throughout, each offering their unique viewpoints on the creative process and their place in the universe. Einstein sets the stage for the ultimate theme of the work, by becoming immediately enamored of a dashed off sketch of Picasso's that Suzanne carries with her. He seems to be the only one to grasp the sketch's full potential and he states, "I'm lucky tonight; I was open to receive it. Another night and I might have dismissed it with a joke or a cruel remark." Upon meeting Picasso, the opposites attract until finally forced into a duel which, in a Steve Martin meets Bugs Bunny moment, consists of both men using a "2,000 year old tool" to sketch an instant masterpiece in an attempt to prove which is more creative, Art or Science. They both win, of course, and then the play is wrapped up with a deus ex machina completely unexpected, yet not out of place in Martin's strange little world. It's a relatively short play, done without interruption, but we feel as if we've traversed eons (in a good way) to get to this point, right here and right now, even if now is 1904.

It all makes sense upon viewing, actually and Teixeira has massaged this script and this cast into something quite beautiful, quirky and comfortably familiar. We are dared to "dream the impossible and put it into practice." Easier said than done. But, perhaps, when the light is right, and the absinthe is slowly prepared just so, we can all be open to the universe around us. As Martin writes, the difference between talent and genius is that they are spelled differently. Did absinthe make artists more creative or were creative people drawn to the beauty of absinthe? The answer is somewhere in the middle, in that "moment of convergence between the thing done and the doing of it." The only real question is, are you open to receive it?

Counter-Productions Theatre Company presents *Picasso at the Lapin Agile*, Written by Steve Martin. Directed by Rufus Qristofer Teixeira. April 11, 12, 17, 18, 19 at 7:30pm. April 13 at 2:00pm. 95 Empire Street, Providence. For more information and tickets, visit cptcri.com.