

A Treat of a Show!: Over the River leaves audiences wanting more



Photo credit: Alison O'Donnell

If you've never been to the Attleboro Community Theatre, you're in for a treat — literally! When you walk in, you're immediately greeted by the theater's executive board members, including President Jeanne Smith and Treasurer Douglas Begin. One of them will escort you to a good-sized sitting area where you can enjoy a number of baked goods selected from a glass case reminiscent of a New York bakery. You can also treat yourself to popcorn and a cold or warm beverage before the show. Even the bathroom has a charming ambiance, making you feel like you're on the set!

Said show is *Over The River And Through The Woods*, the 1998 family comedy by playwright Joe DiPietro. That charming set (designed by Smith, Producer/Director David Blessinger and Tammy England) is a Brooklyn apartment that includes an outside porch, den area and family dining table. Anyone raised in an Italian family will recognize the loud banter and importance of food when the family gathers. To drive the point of providing for the family home, you often hear any one of the cast members proclaiming, "*Tengo familia!*" sometimes in unison. Nick, portrayed by Matthew Gousie, is a young bachelor with aspirations to climb the corporate marketing ladder. When the Jersey man announces to *la familia* that he has been offered a job across the country in Seattle, the grandparents are NOT happy. They do everything in their power to convince Nick to stay, including fixing him up for a meeting with a hopeful Caitlin O'Hare (Marissa Simas). Gousie returns to the stage after an 18-year hiatus. "The cast and director have made it very comfortable for me to come back," he says. "They welcomed me with open arms and have been terrific." Of the play, he says, "I really liked [this play] because it had a little of everything. It tugs on the heartstrings with different notes. I hope it's relatable to people." He

enjoyed working with this cast, adding, “My ‘grandparents’ are so talented!”

Director Blessinger seconds the emotion. “I am truly blessed to have such an amazing cast with so much talent that can invoke such emotion from the audience.” The delightfully funny script can only go so far if the cast can’t deliver the lines well. This cast not only has us roaring with laughter, but draws heartfelt pangs of emotion as the play progresses. Have no fear, however. All’s well that ends well!

It’s hard to not have an astounding cast when you’re working alongside veterans with many years of experience. Portraying Nick’s maternal grandparents are Alex Aponte (Nunzio) and Anne Faiella (Aida). Nunzio is a true *paisan*, a firm master of his household with a bold sense of humor. He makes light of the family taking his car keys away from him, for example, in ways we never see coming. Aida is your typical old-fashioned nonna — all about the food! Then there are the paternal grandparents who come to visit. Alyce Fitzgerald (Emma) and Bob Messier (Frank) enter with lots of energy in their flashy jogging suits. It’s hard to keep a straight face or be mad at these couples as they (try to) nag Nick into submission.

Blessinger wasn’t initially looking at this piece to produce. “Alex Aponte asked me to read the script,” says Blessinger. “He said it would be the perfect show for me to direct. After reading the first few pages, I was hooked and knew I had to direct this show.” He adds, “As a director, you get the opportunity to take a writer’s words and create your vision up on the stage of that play. Sometimes it’s not easy, but with the perfect cast it is magical. I have the perfect cast and crew, which has made directing this show such a wonderful and fun experience. I am thankful to ACT for giving me the opportunity.”

Lighting by Doug Greene (assisted by Blessinger), who recently won two *Motif* awards for his design expertise on *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* and Kevin Broccoli’s *American Strippers*, was spot on. “This production is slightly more cue-oriented than most others I’ve done,” says Greene, whose design expertly alternates full stage to special areas each time a cast member sporadically stepped up for an aside.

Costuming was largely sourced from the cast, with help Jeanne Smith, to reflect each character’s personality and age. Smith also assisted with sound design (featuring Pat Boone’s rendition of “Quando Quando Quando”) and operation, along with Gordon Smith and Dylan Troiano.

As *Over The River* wraps up, you almost hate to leave. It’s not necessarily a bad thing, though, when a performance leaves you hungry for more. *Mangia!*

Attleboro Community Theatre presents Joe DiPietro’s Over the River and Through the Woods through Mar 8 with Fri and Sat night performances at 8pm and Sunday matinees at 2pm. 71 N Main St, Attleboro. For more information, visit attleborocommunitytheatre.com, or call 508-226-8100.