

Arctic's Red Hot Lovers Showcases Brilliant Acting and Direction



In the first five minutes of *Last of the Red Hot Lovers*, we learn just about everything we need to know about the main character without a word of dialogue, as he bumbles around his mother's apartment, obsessively trying to odor-neutralize his fingers, blanching at the taste of scotch and anxiously preparing for his coming tryst. Such is the brilliance of Neil Simon's comedy: that it relies as much on the physical as it does on the witty dialogue; it's multilayered enough to tickle anyone's funny bone, if not with one gag, than with another double entendre. Under Tony Annicone's sharp direction, none of Simon's comedic stones are left unturned in this Arctic Playhouse production.

From those first moments, W. Richard Johnson's Barney Cashman does not seem like the face of the sexual revolution of the '60s: he's mousy and kind of dorky with his blue suit and nasally poindexter-type voice. But after 47 years of a "nice" life and a 23-year "nice" marriage to his high school sweetheart, he's ready for something more than "nice." He attempts to choreograph three different affairs in his mother's apartment before she returns home from volunteering. Johnson's delivery is fantastic, and he captures the clumsy awkwardness of the character beautifully.

Each act is devoted to a different woman with whom Barney attempts to seduce. First up is Elaine (Camille Terilli), who is shameless and no stranger to having affairs. She knows what she wants and doesn't want to waste time on pleasantries, so when Barney does nothing but talk the whole time, she becomes frustrated and annoyed, a problem exacerbated by a lack of cigarettes. Her leopard print dress and larger-than-life presence, again, do a lot to show her character before she utters a line. She and Barney could not be more juxtaposed, which makes their encounter hilarious.

Next up is Bobbi Michelle (Sarah Reed), an actress looking for work, who is bouncing off the walls from start to end. She regales Barney with outrageous stories of situations she's found herself in, all the while oblivious to Barney's intentions. While in the previous encounter Barney did nothing but talk, here, he can't get a word in edgewise. Though Reed does a great job playing Bobbi for what she is, the way this character is written rubs me the wrong the way. Her mental illness is clearly the butt of the joke here, and it seems a shame that her past mental hospital stay and her paranoia are up for laughs. This play did come out in 1969, and this is where the datedness of the play is made clearest. However, this act does bring us one of the funniest moments of the play in which Bobbi convinces Barney to smoke pot with her, and he gets high for the first time.

The third act is the most serious, as Barney makes his final attempt at adultery with his best friend's wife, Jeanette (Katherine Kimmel). Unfortunately, Jeanette is in no mood for an affair; since her husband admitted to having an affair eight months ago, she has been deeply depressed. This is, again, made clear from her first entrance, between her drab clothing, her quiet voice and refusal to make eye contact and the way she protectively clutches her pocketbook. Jeanette's depression is certainly taken more seriously than Bobbi's paranoia, but make no mistake, there are still laughs in this final act, as Barney and Jeanette struggle to come to terms with their own actions and find meaning in life. This is the act that drives it home and makes it clear this is about more than just a man trying to get laid.

Though I have my stipulations about this show, this is a solid production of it. Nancy Rodrigues Spirito's costumes are fantastic at immediately getting across what we're in for with each character: from Elaine's leopard print dress to Bobbi's hippie get-up. Each of the actors are brilliant in their respective roles, and Annicone's direction brings out the best of Neil Simon's play.

The Last of the Red Hot Lovers runs through Nov 3 at The Arctic Playhouse. For tickets, visit theartcticplayhouse.com