



In collaboration with
THEATREDC

Italian American Reconciliation

February 5, 2013 By Steven McKnight

Looking for a unique Valentine's Day experience? Try *Italian American Reconciliation*, John Patrick Shanley's darkly comic yet heartfelt romance now playing at 1st Stage.

Italian American Reconciliation (subtitled "A Folk Tale" when written) is a story told by Aldo, (Drew Kopas) a charismatic bachelor of his lovelorn friend Huey (Matt Dewberry). Even though Huey has been divorced for three years from his toxic ex Janice (Anne Nottage), he stills longs for her so much that his food has no taste. So, he decides to break up with his long-suffering girlfriend Teresa, (Dani Stoller) the soup shop lady, to pursue Janice once again. Aldo gets caught in the middle.

Few writers can match Shanley for his use of lyrical working class dialogue to create urban, working class opera. Among theatre geeks, *Italian American Reconciliation* is considered second tier Shanley, not quite up there with works such as *Savage in Limbo*, *Danny and the Deep Blue Sea*, and the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Doubt*. It was written just as Shanley was reaping the rewards of his Oscar winning script for *Moonstruck*, leading him to write a work similar enough to draw crowds at a time when he was so busy that he did not have the time or the need to tighten the work.



Still, there is much pleasure to be found in *Italian American Reconciliation*. Shanley combines the best of Italian passion with Irish blarney to create conversations that provide a heightened romantic realism. His writing, although wonderfully expressive and poetic, requires a careful balance to be successful.

For example, Shanley's dialogue work's best when a skilled actor takes those fanciful words and gives them a realistic spin. All of the cast members generally succeed, perhaps none so successfully as the always entertaining Suzanne Richard playing the wisdom-dispensing widow Aunt May. Her scenes with the talented Dani Stoller as an emotional Teresa have as much power as the more fervent exchanges of the other characters.

Moving closer to the edge of theatricality (as required by the script) are Drew Kopas as Aldo and Anne Nottage as Janice. Kopas ad libs with the audience while setting up the story and performs some self-satisfied dancing to "Just

a Gigolo.” His Aldo is the kind of guy who is initially irritating to the ladies in the bar, yet whose easy charm gives him enough success that he can avoid committing to anyone.

Janice has to be a truly damaged, menacing, and yet attractive woman, and Nottage finds a way to balance all of those attributes. It’s not easy to feel sympathy for a woman capable of shooting a dog to get a man’s attention, but with Nottage in the role, we do.

The most difficult role is Huey, and it takes a while for Shanley to find his footing in fleshing out the character. It is hard to understand why either Janice or Teresa would be interested in this romantic sad sack, but Dewberry gamely goes where the role leads. His ardent affection for Janice ultimately helps make this offbeat romance work.

Director Michael Chamberlin again demonstrates the sure emotional hand he brought to the rudder of 1st Stage’s *Almost Maine*. He carefully threads the needle of maximizing the absurdly comic nature of the work while still helping the audience empathize with the character.



Speaking of perfect Shanley balance, big kudos to J.D. Madsen for a perfect Shanley set. It starts as a realistic street scene in Manhattan’s Little Italy complete with fire hydrant, fire escapes, and a landing outside Janice’s back door, yet has some wonderful whimsical touches. The wall is painted in the colors of the Italian flag and shows distant trees. This neighborhood also opens into an Italian soup shop featuring the comforts of minestrone soup and pictures of famous Italians and Catholics.

Most people look to Aldo’s greeting card-worthy platitudes at the end of the show about the importance of love for the play’s message. Teresa’s earlier plaintive remark sums it up even better: “I got feelings, you know?”

This sensitive yet funny production of Shanley’s *Italian American Reconciliation* is ideal for the Valentine’s Day season, and has enough heart for any theatregoer, any time, to enjoy.