

Italian American Reconciliation at 1st Stage Theater

February 6, 2013 by Brian Bochicchio

Have you ever ordered a dish—maybe an eggplant parm, or a nice pasta with vodka cream sauce- and it came back different than expected, but hey, you uh...liked it bettah?

This could happen to you when you see 1st Stage Theater's *Italian American Reconciliation*, "playing in the industrial hinterland," by way of Tyson's Corner, VA. Expecting lite fare, I was treated to a singularly complex production brimming with age-old questions about our human condition. It was a delight to be brought into this world from the mind of John Shanley, an Irish-American playwright from the Bronx. Mr. Shanley is best known for his Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Doubt* and his Oscar-winning screenplay of "Moonstruck" in 1987. *Italian American Reconciliation* opened off Broadway a year after that.

Here in Tysons, we are transported onto a New York street corner, compliments of set designer JD Madsen and his amazing recreation of a back alley, complete with fire escape. I never once thought of it as a stage. All the action takes place outdoors, giving the goings-on freedom, energy, and pop. The characters, guided by the able direction of Michael Chamberlin, don't go for Jersey Shore accents—a hint of attitude here and there places it nicely on Little Italy's Mulberry Street. And the pacing of the cast is relaxed yet energetic. We want to know about these people—interesting and sometimes irritating they may be.



Our guide into this pepperoni slice of Americana is Aldo (Drew Kopas), a quick-talking ladies man who shows effortless movement onstage reminiscent of Gene Kelly. Dressed in a plaid Zoot-suit type outfit (that he somehow pulls off), he tells us the goings on in the neighborhood and of his best bud Huey (Matt Dewberry).

Alas, his friend is an emotional wreck. His ex-wife, a dark brooding type, has stolen part of his essence, and he needs to get her and it back. His nice pacing and extreme emotional rants make us believe his intentions, though he first must break his current relationship with Teresa (Dani Stoller). Huey can't be persuaded out of his plan so Aldo helps, even breaking his wiseguy exterior to send an "I Love You Man" to Huey.

Sensing something is wrong, Teresa spills her soul to kindly Aunt May (a wonderful Susanne Richard) who is the sounding board and dispenser of wisdom for these torn characters. Teresa decides to tell him she wants a breakup, only to have Huey utter those dreaded words first. Ms. Stoller gives an emotionally gripping portrayal of mixed feelings, with none of the histrionics.

Aldo, still helping Huey, but with possible motives of his own, asks Teresa why she doesn't like him. She says because he's a mama's boy. When he says no, its because he's not the marrying kind, she quips "Is there a difference?" Great moments mixed in with the angst. And finally, there is Aldo paving the way for Huey to now make amends with Janice, (Anne Nottage) Huey's ex. She has a bit of a temper. Shot hubby's dog and almost shot him. Bad aim or slight conscience, we don't know. Ms. Nottage shows a dark harsh side that hides the pain of not being loved. And in slow layers she reveals her pain and her needs to Huey.

Aldo tries to feign interest in Janice, to help Huey,— or does he? Janice's reaction and her dark manner make us wonder why Huey would want to get back with her. Can there really be a reconciliation? How will Huey do it?



And that is the disclaimer part. Hmm...gotta get to the show. Ah, but there is so much exploration, and unearthed pain – from several characters regarding love from their father to why we love and being able to love—that the emotions cut to the heart of our human existence, illustrated in small vignettes. The sum is greater than the ending.

As everyone wrestles with their own fears, Aldo listens to Aunt May's advice on the opposite sex– "You gotta give up your fear of women as a race," and as everyone else wrestles with their own fears, Aldo realizes, "The only success is to be able to love." In the end we are all searching for the answer to the same question. We just have to work it out ourselves, or just listen to wise Aunt May.

***Italian American Reconciliation* is a singularly successful evening, blending a terrific cast with deft characterizations. Mangia!**

Running Time: 2 hours with a 15 minute intermission.

Italian American Reconciliation is presented at the 1st Stage in Tysons Corner, 1524 Spring Hill Rd McLean, VA 22102 from Feb. 1 to Feb. 24, 2013. For tickets to this or other performances in the 2012-2013 season, call the information line at (703) 854-1856 or contact the theatre online.