

Arts & Entertainment

Comedy, Tenderness Rule at World Premiere of *Love (Awkwardly)*

By SUSAN MYRILL DOUGHERTY
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

SCOTCH PLAINS – With memories of high school love perhaps fresher in his brain, a former Union Catholic student collaborated with his former teacher on a play that comfortably wrestles the issue of young love to the ground like preteens roughhousing in a living room.

Love (Awkwardly) held its World Premiere on late last month at Union Catholic School's Performing Arts Center (PAC) in Scotch Plains. Written, staged and directed by John Rotondo and Maryann Carolan, the play, according to the program, is based on ideas and stories from 12 students at the school, some who star in this ensemble piece.

Mr. Rotondo, a Tisch School of the Arts dramatic-writing student, is a

former student of Ms. Carolan, a full-time English teacher and Performing Arts director at Union Catholic High School in Scotch Plains.

Vignettes, which circuitously intertwine to form a loose storyline, could be taken from a page of almost any teenager's diary where stream-of-consciousness meets soliloquy.

Covering unrequited love, getting dumped on your birthday and rollercoaster emotions, the play is a lighthearted comedy that follows eight juniors and seniors as they are faced with handling these feelings, which are adult in scope yet hampered by the constriction of high school.

"For 17 years, I've never had these emotions, and now, that's all I feel," one character shares with a whine. The characters ponder, "What exactly constitutes cheating?" and "How lame is it

to want to make out with your girlfriend's best friend?"

The collaborators' clever use of technology, with Facebook entries in the program instead of the traditional biographical entries, works well. Mr. Rotondo and Ms. Carolan pull that contemporary thread into the staging, which includes a gigantic movie screen onstage that, at times, sports the characters' own Facebook entries.

Fantasy prevails in a number of scenes where Ninjas enter, and the male characters see themselves as heroes with whom their ladylove will melt with gratitude. Lest one think that this is a fluff piece, there are profound statements by some of the teens to show that they are not all just thinking with their hormones.

"Talking and listening are the most important part of a relationship," main character Eddie (Jordan Morrissey) says. He suffers from an inferiority complex, and just like Charlie Brown pines for the little girl with the red hair, he's madly in love with gal pal Wendy (Justine Mujica), who is pretty clueless as to his feelings.

In this show, the traditional "perfect couple" breaks up — because people just grow apart. Philosophical, tender, heartbreaking moments are juxtaposed with wit and comedy.

As a group project, this play works brilliantly to showcase superior acting talents of teenagers Jordan Morrissey, Justine Mujica, Greg Gedman, Sammie Mellina of Westfield, Arielle Gonzalez, Conor McDonough, Bobby Dyckman and Taziana Molinaro.

Graphic and media designer Mike Brown and choreographer Emily Eger play behind-the-scenes roles to bring the show together as a visual package.

Love (Awkwardly) is the first produced piece of the playwrights, who span a 20-year gap in age. Because there is a balance of male/female perspective and young/experienced voices shared, this is a powerful, creative duo.

be heroic and to know what's important in this infinitesimally rare opportunity of existence we've been granted. Well, in-between its weepy, calculating tactics, *My Sister's Keeper* manages to acknowledge that sublimity.

While a goodly share of the dramatics plays *la soap opera*, there are enough genuine moments to strike a chord of realization in us. For sure it gets heavy. But, Mr. Cassavetes knows not to turn it into a dirge, applying comedy relief or a segue each time it seems total despair might encroach. Ultimately, the tragic tale is about the human spirit.

Helping analyze that commodity, all the youngsters are great. Though roles considered gimmicky are usually shunned at Oscar time, Sofia Vassilieva's brave new Camille will not be so easily dismissed. Miss Breslin is credible as the poked, prodded and marrow-drained little sis who lawyers-up. And Evan Ellingson adeptly creates the "other child."

It's the parents who are troubling. Certainly Diaz gives it the old college try as Sara. But, the naturalness so winning in her comic portrayals gives way to a self-conscious, see-through look at the serious gears turning. And while probably no fault of his own, Jason Patric as the dad never reaches beyond two dimensions.

He is Brian Fitzgerald, a nice enough, semi-willing accomplice to Sara's full-court abrogation of everything but Kate's fate. What confounds us, though, is how he manages on a fireman's salary. It's alluded that his people have money, but we never see them fork it over. OK, so he has good benefits. But who's paying the bills?

Other everyday, real-life matters go by the wayside, too. However, Miss Vassilieva's Kate sees to it that we're not given short shrift when it comes to the icky, hospital and sickness stuff. The heartrending diversions are of the type that can fell the sturdiest resolves and make one appreciative of the good health and fortune they hopefully enjoy.

But for all the uplifting trappings and the surprise twist that earn it respectability, this is a bona fide sob fest. Women will make no fuss but merely estimate how many boxes of tissues they'll need. Men, on the other hand, who accompany them to see *My Sister's Keeper*, may want to practice faking like they have cinders stuck in their peepers.

My Sister's Keeper, rated PG-13, is a New Line Cinema release directed by Nick Cassavetes and stars Sofia Vassilieva, Abigail Breslin and Cameron Diaz. Running time: 109 minutes.



POPCORN My Sister's Keeper: Finders, Weepers

One Popcorn, Poor • Two Popcorns, Fair • Three Popcorns, Good • Four Popcorns, Excellent

By MICHAEL S. GOLDBERGER
2 and 1/2 popcorns

Nobody knows the trouble I've seen. That is, unless they've seen director Nick Cassavetes' *My Sister's Keeper*. It's not exactly the feel-good film you've been seeking. But if it's a first-class, cathartic cry you're after, be assured the adaptation of Jodi Picoult's novel has a license to sadden. Even strapping he-men will bawl. Trust me. Of course one isn't just shedding tears for teenager Kate Fitzgerald (Sofia Vassilieva), the perulously ill leukemia, or her careworn family. Nor are we solely submerged in the touching plight of her sister Anna (Abigail Breslin), the boutique kid expressly conceived to supply older sis with spare parts. There's more, and it's the more that makes it work.

But first, Anna does draw us into the tale. It's whimsically intriguing when the spunky 11-year-old waltzes uninvited into the inner sanctum of major legal honcho Campbell Alexander, splendidly played by Alec Baldwin. She has \$700 and wants medical emancipation from her parents. The good counselor smells precedent.

Quite coincidentally, Kate's mom, Sara (Cameron Diaz), was a practicing attorney until she decided to devote her entire being to the role of lifesaver. Thus, after ascertaining that her youngest is dead serious, the awkward legal battle ensues...plaintiff and attorney for the defense living under the same roof, and otherwise trying to maintain family harmony.

Indeed, there's no denying the feeling of manipulation. The technique is old, and Mr. Cassavetes is cognizant of which buttons to push for the desired, empathetic result. Yet, because the story itself is woven with due integrity and not without its absorbing pull, we grant the director permission to tug at our heartstrings. We suspect it's for a good cause.

True enough, there are the requisite rushes to the emergency room, perfidious domestic squabbles and an obligatory appreciation of how the courts increasingly invade our day-to-day affairs. Yet, there is also what we generally ask of art when we plunk down the bucks: a look-see at our foibles, follies and fortitude.

You see, for all the sci-fi conjecture about parallel universes, fact is the concept has been up and running ever since Oog came back to the cave and told his version of how he confronted the mastodon. There is art, and there is reality. And each borrows from the other in a hyperkinetic love affair that adds up to the life experience.

And, unless we are the sort of ne'er-do-wells who thrive on mendacity, we want our lives to be true, noble and good. We want to



Photos by Susan M. Dougherty

WESTFIELD – Nominees for Paper Mill Playhouse's Rising Star Awards from Westfield get another chance to perform a song from their spring musical, *Kiss Me, Kate*. At the awards show in mid-June, costumed teens from all over the state provided a Tony's-type show, where each of the finalists gave the audience a taste of their award-worthy performance. Westfield High School's Peter Surace, as Fred Graham/Petruchio, sang "Where is the Life that Late I Led?" (above) while Catalina Gaglioti, as Lilli Vanessi/Katherinesang, "I Hate Men!" (below).

Each of these two students was awarded a scholarship to the Paper Mill Playhouse's summer conservatory for being a finalist.

Winner of the Outstanding Performance by an Actor in a Leading Role went to Anthony Bruno, of Bergen County Academies, as the Baker in *Into the Woods*. In the category of Outstanding Performance by an Actress in a Leading Role went to Julia Knitel, from Fair Lawn High School, as Millie Dillmount in *Thoroughly Modern Millie*. Over \$100,000 in scholarships and money was distributed that night. Nearby Rahway High School took home the award for the Outstanding Overall Production of a Musical with their production of *The Will Rogers Follies*.



WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT...? Juniors Greg Gedman and Arielle Gonzalez experience *Love (Awkwardly)*. Courtesy of Meredith LaCorte

Premiere Stages Sets Sail With *Duck Crossing*

UNION – Premiere Stages at Kean University officially opens its 2009 season with John Wooten's new play, *Duck Crossing*.

In this comic take on history's most famous river crossing, George Washington has set out to cross the Delaware to surprise-attack the Hessians and turn the tide of war. However, the river freezes when Washington and his men are only halfway across.

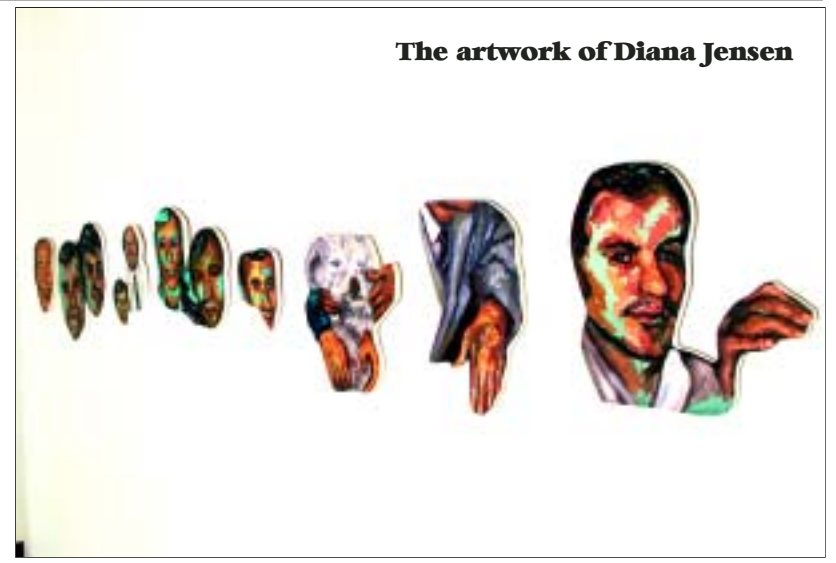
The colonists are forced to contemplate their escape from the icy abyss, knowing full well that the future of the country hangs in the balance. The professional cast includes Broadway veteran Brian Sutherland as Washington.

"The crossing was the high-water mark of the revolution. If Washington had not made it to Trenton on that Christmas morning, we'd all likely be speaking with English accents," said John Wooten, Premiere Stages' producing artistic director.

"The play gives us a window into what the journey might have been like for Washington. The stakes could not have been higher," he continued.

Duck Crossing runs from Thursday, July 16, through Sunday, August 2, in Kean University's Zella Fry Theatre. Friday, July 31, and Sunday performances begin at 3 p.m.; all others are at 8 p.m. In collaboration with Premiere Stages, Liberty Hall Museum at Kean University will host tours and teas preceding matinee performances and offer discounted museum tours for patrons with a Premiere Stages ticket stub.

Museum patrons will receive \$5 off each ticket with proof of entry. Tickets range from \$15 to \$25. A catered wine event will be held at the museum prior to the performance on opening night. To learn more, call (908) 737-4092 or visit kean.edu/premierestages.



Artistic Long Division Makes Jensen's Paintings the Sum Parts of the Whole

By MARYLOU MORANO
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

AREA – If her artistic work is any indication, Diana Jensen probably did well in math in school.

At the very least, she must have been good at division because the Brooklyn-based artist likes to divide things into the sum parts of their whole.

Take a group photograph, for example.

Ms. Jensen goes beyond seeing the photo as a collective entity and focuses instead on each member of the group.

She accomplishes this by isolating the faces, hands, heads and other objects from the group photo and recreating them as separate oil paintings on wood.

Ms. Jensen's recent Tomasulo Gallery exhibit, "Group Shot Italy, 1972," is one such example of her artistic long division.

It is an installation of 40 small, irregularly shaped oils isolated from a photograph found in a flea market in Rome.

The photo's only identifiable marking was the terse description, "Elizabeth's Birthday, 1972," recorded on its reverse side.

In the process of recreating the individual paintings, Ms. Jensen is able to "rediscover and resurrect the people in these forgotten photos."

"...[I] examined the details of this photograph [by] looking for signs of intimacy, personality and relationships," she said.

The paintings' small size – some

as small as 5 x 7 inches – contrasted with the overwhelming experience of seeing the exhibit displayed in its entirety on more than 30 feet of Tomasulo Gallery wall space.

The viewer truly gets the impression that these subjects, while now reduced to a fraction of their whole, do indeed demonstrate a stronger sense of individuality and identity.

"Our identities as individuals are lost in a group photo, [and] we exist only in relation to others," said Ms. Jensen.

"...[M]y impulse was to dismantle this mass collective experience. I have liberated these folks from a sea of anonymity and given them a renewed chance at individuality," she continued.

Ms. Jensen's heavy oil brushstrokes emphasize each subject's detail and expression, and at first, her work can be likened to a puzzle.

But unlike a puzzle, where the importance of an individual piece depends on how it fits into the whole, each of Ms. Jensen's paintings stands alone as a piece of art in its own right.

Ms. Jensen, who holds a Master of Fine Arts degree from Northwestern University, has exhibited in New York City, Miami, Helsinki and London, among other locations.

For more information on Ms. Jensen, visit dianajensen.com.

Ms. Jensen's exhibit closed Tomasulo Gallery's 2008-2009 season. The gallery will reopen in September.

'This Land Is Your Land' Revisits Geography, History

MOUNTAINSIDE – Ronnie Brandt will perform his "This Land Is Your Land" musical presentation at Trailside Nature and Science Center in Mountainside on Wednesday, July 15, at 1:30 p.m. as part of Trailside's Summer Wednesday Matinee Series.

"This Land Is Your Land" is an interactive journey through America's history and geography, with Mr. Brandt's singing and storytelling acting as the guide. Crowds will learn about Christopher Columbus, the heroes at the Alamo, the Pony Express and other American sagas.

Mr. Brandt became interested in music while growing up in Plainfield and Asbury Park. His early influences included Woody Guthrie, Carl Sandburg, The Carter Family, Hank

Williams and other American songwriters.

After years of performing up and down the east coast, he created a school program to educate students about the rich American heritage and landscape. "This Land Is Your Land" has become a hit with teachers and students alike, and it is a favorite addition to many school assemblies.

Tickets go on sale at 1 p.m. on July 15, and the fee is \$4 per person. No infants or babies in strollers are allowed in the auditorium. Call Trailside for information regarding group rates.

To learn more, call (908) 789-3670 or visit ucnj.org/trailside. Trailside Nature and Science Center is located at 452 New Providence Road in Mountainside.

NJPAC/ NJ Youth Theatre Present *Sweeney Todd*

NEWARK – The annual summer collaboration between the New Jersey Performing Arts Center (NJPAC) and the award-winning New Jersey Youth Theatre (NJYT) will lead to the re-telling of Stephen Sondheim's macabre, Tony Award-winning musical thriller, *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*.

More humorous than the film version starring Johnny Depp, this new production of the classic tells the suspenseful story of barber Benjamin Barker (aka Sweeney Todd), who returns to grimy 19th-century London vowing to extract revenge for his false imprisonment with the help of immoral baker Mrs. Lovett.

Under their twisted strategy, Sweeney will murder his victims in his barber chair, and Mrs. Lovett will turn them into the tastiest meat pies in London.

The NJPAC/NJYT production of *Sweeney Todd* features a cast of 30 New Jersey actors, ages 15 to 22 years old. "Our young performers seem to thrive

on our raising the bar. *Sweeney Todd* is the most demanding production we have undertaken in our 18 years, but I feel confident that the cast and musicians will meet the vocal and dramatic challenges head on and deliver remarkable performances," said Cynthia Meryl, artistic director and co-founder of New Jersey Youth Theatre.

An orchestra of experienced student musicians and seasoned professionals will accompany the *Sweeney Todd* cast. Ms. Meryl directs the production, with musical direction by Ilene Greenbaum and choreography by Assistant Director Sherry Alban.

Sweeney Todd premieres in NJPAC's Victoria Theater on Friday, July 17, at 7:30 p.m. and runs for nine performances through Sunday, July 26. Tickets, between \$16 and \$35, are available by telephone at (888) GO-NJPAC (888) 466-5722, at the NJPAC Box Office at One Center Street in downtown Newark or by visiting njpac.org.



Jaelyn Ingoglia as Mrs. Lovett and Kevin Melendez as Sweeney Todd in NJYT's production of *Sweeney Todd* at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark and the Algonquin Arts Theatre in Manasquan.

The New York Times calls it "Gidget Goes Berserk!"

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