

“Once Upon a Mattress” a True Summertime Treat

by C. Kevin Smith

Last week the Twitterverse was abuzz with excitement over the story of a woman in England who had sent a blunt e-mail to her soon-to-be daughter-in-law. The e-mail, which quickly went viral worldwide, detailed an aggrieved list of complaints about the young woman’s dietary preferences, sleeping habits, and other assorted transgressions, including the unfortunate crime of having less than well-off parents. Dubbed “Momzilla,” the groom’s mother is now holding her tongue, in preparation for what will surely be a memorable wedding.

A mischievous wedding planner might suggest that the young British couple spend their honeymoon in Carmel and see “Once Upon A Mattress,” the delightful musical version of the classic Anderson fairy tale “Princess and the Pea.” Co-presented by the MPC Theatre Company and the Forest Theatre Guild and directed by MPC Theatre Arts Chairman Gary Bolen, “Once Upon A Mattress” tells the story of a queen mother so controlling and so unwilling to allow her son to marry that she devises a series of ridiculously impossible tests for any potential princess vying for the prince’s hand. To make matters worse, she decrees that no one in the kingdom may marry until her son does, leaving everyone frustrated and unhappy, which is clearly just as the queen likes it.

The royal family are played by a trio of wonderful actors. Jennifer L. Newman is the glowering Queen Aggravain, a true Momzilla who tromps across the stage with comic verve. As her son, Prince Dauntless, Daniel Joseph Renfer successfully conveys the yearning nature of a young man desperate to break away from his mother’s possessive clutches. Mike Baker is the scene-stealing, servant-chasing, wildly expressive King Sextimus the Silent, rendered mute long ago by a mysterious curse.

Having rejected every available female in the kingdom for her son, Queen Aggravain is content to wait several years for a new crop of princesses to grow up, but Lady Larkin (the charming Michelle Boulware) and Sir Harry (Keith Wolhart) have their own privately urgent reasons to find Prince Dauntless a bride. Sir Harry departs on a quest to locate a new candidate, returning with the Princess Winnifred the Woebegone (the vibrant Camila de la Llata), a young woman so utterly unsuitable that we know at once her marriage to the Prince is a foregone conclusion.

Renfer and de la Llata appeared together last year in MPC’s outstanding production of “Rent,” and here they display terrific chemistry and superb comic timing. As the earthy Princess Winnifred, de la Llata offers a commanding, high-energy performance that at times seems to channel Carol Burnett, who originated the role on Broadway.

A foiled attempt at escape by Lady Larkin occasions the marvelous song “Normandy.” Featuring the Minstrel (the excellent Sean Boulware), the Jester (the appealing Dale Thompson) and Lady Larkin, this intimate trio contrasts nicely with the play’s more

energetic numbers and is one of the vocal highlights of the production. (The music is by Mary Rodgers.)

Another hilarious highlight is the “Nightingale Lullaby,” sung by Phyllis Davis in an elaborate headdress that must be seen to be believed.

The energy of this production is generally so high that a couple of scenes feel slack-paced in comparison. As the narcissistic Sir Harry, Wolhart offers a remote, underpowered performance. Mitchell Davis is the Wizard, performing his magic tricks with snappy flourish, but less successful in his lackluster duet with the Queen (“Sensitivity”).

The fine musical accompaniment, directed by Barney Hulse, contributes to the humorous atmosphere of Broadway-slash-Medieval pageantry, and the costumes, lighting, choreography, sound and stage design are all first-rate. With its royal castle setting, surrounded by pine trees and a starlit sky, “Once Upon A Mattress” is an ideal play for Carmel’s Outdoor Forest Theatre, where director Bolen and his talented team of artists and collaborators have created a true summertime treat.

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