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Lessons in loss

World premiere of 'Appoggiatura' washes over one family's grief

By Gregory Thorson

Appoggiatura begins in a Venice hotel where three people have come to mourn the death of Gordon — a husband, lover and grandfather. Grandmother Helen seeks to remember the beauty of an early trip to Italy with Gordon, who has since left her for the pessimistic Aunt Chuck. Nicknamed because of his close relationship with Helen's granddaughter, Sylvie, Aunt Chuck is Gordon's long time homosexual partner, and he struggles to overcome his broken heart. Sylvie has recently graduated from college and is searching for her place in the world. Their trip is led by the flashy but incompetent tour guide Marco.

The play is an emotionally touching and insightful look at an untraditional family dealing with love and loss while vacationing in Venice — the word *appoggiatura*, pronounced "uh-poj-uh-too-ruh" refers to a musical note that temporarily displaces and then resolves into a main note. A temporary dissonance, in other words, followed by resolution and harmony.

However unconventional, the members of this family appear to care deeply about one another — Helen and Aunt Chuck have a tender relationship, despite their shared intimacy with Gordon at different parts of their lives.

Denver Center Theater Company commissioned playwright James Still to write *Appoggiatura*, which was developed at the Colorado New Play Summit in 2014 and presented by the Denver Center Theater Company as a world premiere.

Throughout the play, a trio of street musicians play multiple characters and instruments, adding a sense of Venice. Played by triple-threat actors, singers and musicians Julian Remulla, Paul Bentzen and Mehry Eslaminia, these three welcome the audience and build a sense of warmth.

The playwright uses another interesting convention in bringing the character of Gordon as a young man into the play. Flashbacks are often separate from the rest of the play's plot, but in *Appoggiatura*, Still has Gordon interact with characters in the present. The actor who plays Gordon, Nick Mills, also plays Marco the tour guide, even dexterously changing between the two in a single scene.

Mills displays terrific virtuosity in alternating roles of Gordon and Marco, bringing good comedic sense to his role of the underprepared tour guide. Denver Center Theater veteran Darrie Lawrence plays the role of Helen with a sense of sweetness and caring. Lenne Klingaman shows strong acting range in the dual roles of Sylvie and Young Helen. As Aunt Chuck, Rob Nagle portrays the suffering of the recent loss of his partner of nearly 25 years with refreshing underpinnings of well-timed caustic wit.

If there's a flaw, it's that the complicated relationships among these characters are not always aptly translated for audiences.

Yet director Risa Brainin has successfully integrated the play's challenging conventions. The street musicians blend into the production and help to move the play's action from scene to scene. The play has a melancholy air, but Brainin brings a light-hearted and heart-warming tone to the production — a nice counterbalance. David M. Barber's gorgeous set is simple and intricate, easy in its transition from one to the next of the numerous locations in which the action takes place. Projections used to signify the different locations bring color and texture to the production. Meghan Anderson Doyle and Charles R. MacLeod's costume and lighting design support without distracting attention from the play.

As a world premiere and a play that was commissioned by Denver Center Theater Company, *Appoggiatura*'s artists have been uniquely focused on the playwright's vision. The Denver Center provided financial resources for Still to complete the play, and it has been shepherded through the center's process of revisions and rehearsals via the well-respected Colorado New Play Summit. For audiences, there is a special connection that occurs in watching that process and seeing a premiere. *Appoggiatura* proves an original and interesting partner.

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