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Appoggiatura

Appoggiatura [It.]. A leaning. A dissonant pitch occurring in a strong metrical position and resolving by ascending or descending step to a consonance in a relatively weaker metrical position. (*The Harvard Dictionary of Music*, 2nd edition)

As the definition indicates, the story begins on a discordant pitch, with Helen (Darrie Lawrence), Aunt Chuck (Rob Nagle), and Sylvie (Lenne Klingaman) bickering in a makeshift guest room in a crumbling Venetian hotel—while waiting for the tour guide, Marco (Nick Mills)—and resolves in a poignant, if uncertain, key.

Yet despite attempts to define appoggiatura, one only need scratch the surface of musical theory to learn that everyone seems to have their own variation, which perhaps accounts for the hybrid nature of this quirky story, filled with delightful baubles of unexpected revelations and returns, tristesse, and clever shtick. At a couple of points, a kitsch keepsake—a music box festooned with a gondola which, when opened, plays "Row, row, row your boat"—is introduced to remind us that "life is but a dream."



Rob Nagle as Aunt Chuck
and Darrie Lawrence as Helen
Photo: Jennifer M. Koskinen

For where else but a dream do sensory memories mix with the present, as if time disappeared? This is a nifty trick if it works, and playwright James Still puts his own stamp on the technique, with more emphasis on anachronism than Tennessee Williams, but nevertheless lyrical in its own way.

Much of this lyricism comes from a trio of Venetian Street Musicians—Julian Remulla, Paul Bentzen, and Mehry Eslaminia—who also play a variety of other characters, as well as provide some sound effects, including the local



Mehry Eslaminia,
Paul Bentzen,
and Julian Remulla
Photo: Jennifer M. Koskinen

street canines, to hilarious effect.

Helen and Aunt Chuck were both married to Gordon (Nick Mills [younger], Paul Bentzen [older]): Helen, when they were young; and Aunt Chuck, after Gordon discovered he was gay. Helen and Aunt Chuck bring Sylvie, Helen's granddaughter, with them to Venice, where the two of them had, at different times, enjoyed time with Gordon, recently deceased. Venice, in turn, provides all three of them, in its inimitable way, with some magical responses to their issues.

As the older Helen, Lawrence is the heart of the show, opening herself up to the endless possibilities that Venice, and life itself, offer, and showing the way for the other characters to accept the multiple layers of events presenting themselves.

This captivation begins as soon as the lights come up, with Vivaldi (Remulla) in full Carnival costume, enticing her with short, sweet violin passages. With each musical phrase, as soon as Helen opens the shutters to find him, he hides. She smiles at Venice's telltale elusive charms. Remulla is dashing as the famed Baroque composer and musician.



Darrie Lawrence as Helen
and Julian Remulla as Vivaldi
Photo: Jennifer M. Koskinen



Lenne Klingaman as Sylvie
and Nick Mills as Marco
Photo: Jennifer M. Koskinen

Early on, Aunt Chuck is an enigma. How are Helen and Chuck related to Gordon? But once the backstory is unlocked, we find ourselves in rarely explored theatrical territory, revisiting a man's life from the perspective of both a female and male lover. Nagle is a sweet softie as Aunt Chuck, eventually gaining some measure of closure after receiving an unexpected gift from

Gordon's ethereal self.

Sylvie, like her grandfather and her adopted "aunt," is gay. Klingaman's depiction of Sylvie's roller coaster identity crisis with a controlling lover is refreshing in its contemporary honesty vis-à-vis the sexual confusion of her parents' and grandparents' generation. She is then thrown in with Marco (whose knowledge of Venice is mostly fabricated), who is attracted to her. After the air is cleared regarding sexual identities, Klingaman hoists anchor and sets sail for uncharted territory—the sensual synaesthesia of Venice—rolling with the punches.



Darrie Lawrence as Helen
and Lenne Klingaman as Young Helen
Photo: Jennifer M. Koskinen



Nick Mills as Marco
and Lenne Klingaman as Young Helen
Photo: Jennifer M. Koskinen

Mills' part-gigolo, part-comic routine infuses his scenes with a delightful imbalance, in striking contrast to his constrained young Gordon and Klingaman's effusive young Helen.

While the outcome remains forever in doubt, there is no doubt that Venice has bestowed a unique gift upon everyone.

The Denver Center Theatre Company's world premiere of *Appoggiatura* runs through February 22nd. For tickets: 800-641-1222 or denvercenter.org.

Bob Bows