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### Theater

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\*\*\* ½ Stars (out of four) | World Premiere



Helen (Darrie Lawrence) and Helen (Lenne Klingaman) share a moment in the magical Venice of James Still's "Appoggiatura."

Dissonance and grace, sorrow and wit, frustration and wonder nuzzle each other in James Still's "Appoggiatura," getting a beguiling premiere at the Denver Center. This is as it should be.

After all, that lovely Italian word of the title — a musical term — describes a note that leans upon another. It can embellish or support. And in the hands of the right soul, it can do both. "Appoggiatura" convinces us that playwright Still is such a soul.

Helen, Charles and Sylvie have traveled together to Venice. Although Charles — or Aunt Chuck as he's called with stubborn affection — has lost his suitcase, he and his companions each arrive with emotional baggage.

Aunt Chuck (Rob Nagle) grieves. Helen (Darrie Lawrence) does, too, but also meets this adventure with a welcoming awe. Having graduated from college, Sylvie (Lenne Klingaman) doubts her next steps, in particular getting hitched to longtime love Kate.

In Venice they are met with a pouring rain, a cramped room nothing like the accommodations promised and a tour guide who's not very good. Marco hung out his Internet shingle and Helen bit.

Now the tourists have a guide whose grasp of Venetian history is shallow but whose appreciation for the essence of this watery metropolis runs deep.

From the start, the play teases us with what is real and what is imagined. Standing on a balcony, Helen plays a red light/green light game with a masked fiddling figure on the street below.

Lawrence anchors "Appoggiatura." In her warm performance, optimism and melancholy share a home. Nagle captures Aunt Chuck's hurt. He's nearly a pill — to even himself — but for such true reasons. As Sylvie, Klingaman delivers a young woman's restive energy. She's even more appealing playing the bride Helen finds while lost in Venice.

Nick Mills is a wonderful tonic as the impossibly winning fool Marco. Late in the play, the actor portrays a young man visiting Venice for a very brief spell with his bride.

Director Risa Brainin conducts her cast with the poetic rhythms a play called "Appoggiatura" demands.

Violinist Julian Remulla takes on the character of the masked Vivaldi with aplomb. He also — along with Mehry Eslaminia and Paul Bentzen — steps in as other characters.

Which brings us to the play's other "tour guider." At a table, Helen and Chuck recite one of those

Shakespeare quotes that invites a lifetime of pondering: "All the world's a stage/And all the men and women merely players ... "

There is an artistry to being a traveler, to being human. You can haunt the background or be present. Like the best travelers, the trio meets up and separates, each crafting in their wanderings their own journey of reckoning.

Shifts in the real and the fantastical aren't overstated. Still, director Brainin trusts us to go with the flow. If we get lost for a moment, it's OK; just head — as an old man advises Helen, "*a destra, a sinistra, dritto dritto*" — and you'll be where you need to be.

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