STAGEscenaLA
STEVEN STANLEY'S STAGESCENELA.COM: SPOTLIGHTING THE BEST IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA THEATER

TASTY LITTLE RABBIT

STAGEscenaLA WOW!

Is it pornography or is it art? That is the question posed by prolific playwright Tom Jacobson in his provocative latest, Tasty Little Rabbit, now tantalizing audiences at Moving Arts.

The year is 1936, the place is Taormina, Sicily, and the art/pornography in question consists of the male nude photographs taken four decades earlier by the infamous Wilhelm Von Gloden (Robert Mammana), in particular those snapped of Von Gloden's then eighteen-year-old model-turned-lover Pancrazio Buciuni (Massi Pregoni).

Before the most offensive of the sepia photographs can be destroyed, however, Italian Fascist official Francesco Maffiotti (Rob Nagle) must determine which of them cross the line into obscenity and which do not, and so he and Taormina mayor Cesare Acrosso (Mammana) have shown up to interview the now 50something Pancrazio, who has inherited not only Von Gloden's photography business but his collection of photos as well.

Maffioti's interrogation is quickly punctuated by flashback sequences that take us back thirty-nine years to the arrival in Taormina of English writer Sebastian Melmoth (Nagle), about whom Wilhelm can only say that "what happened to him in England is the worst that can happen to anyone."

It doesn't take long for young Pancrazio to realize that "a politely brutal competition" is brewing between the two older men and that if his suspicions are correct, Pancrazio himself is the "tasty little rabbit" being offered as a prize.

Alternating between 1930s Fascist Italy and the more permissive Gay Nineties, Tasty Little Rabbit has older Pancrazio defending his ex-lover's honor, his memory, and his precious photographs as his younger persona finds himself torn between two men who both love and desire him.

It also gradually becomes clear to the audience how and why Sebastian has, in Wilhelm's words, "suffered as Christ himself," and just who he might actually be.

Jacobson's latest play provides a fascinating biographical look at both a photographer

whose pastoral nude studies of Sicilian boys are as gorgeously shot as they are erotically alluring and a writer shamed out of his homeland for acting on sexual impulses that could see a man of his predilections sentenced to years of hard labor designed to break even the toughest of gay men.

Not only that, but under George Bamber's incisive direction, it proves an acting showcase par excellence for two of Los Angeles's busiest and most versatile stage stars and for a young actor who first captivated local audiences two years ago as a 14-year-old American high school student in Greg Burdick's Accommodation.

The always formidable Nagle adds two distinctly different characters to his already extensive stage resume, one somewhat ambivalent about Von Gloden's photographs, the other a gentleman of refinement nearly rubbed out by societal prejudice and draconian homophobic laws.

Mammana is equally memorable as both an artist dedicated to preserving masculine youth and beauty for all posterity and a man on a mission to destroy every trace of Von Gloeden's "degenerate perversion of masculinity," even if it means disposing of photos he himself posed for, willingly it would seem, in his youth.

Last but not least, it's hard to imagine Tasty Little Rabbit working nearly as well without rising star Pregoni, who not only has the striking looks and stunning physique of one of Von Gloeden's nude models but bilingual fluency in both English and Italian and the assured acting chops that won him a Breakout Performance Scenie two years ago.

Scenic designer Mark Mendelson, lighting designer Dan Weingarten, and projection designer Nick Santiago have combined their prodigious talents to give Tasty Little Rabbit so gorgeous a production design, you'll be oohing and aahing Taormina from the moment you enter the theater, and Garry Lennon's costumes, John Zalewski's sound design, and Jenine MacDonald's props are every bit as topnotch.

Mara Aguilar is stage manager. Casting is by Michael Donovan, CSA. Judith Borne is publicist.

Like Tom Jacobson's most recent triumph, the award-winning Crevasse, Tasty Little Rabbit gives audiences a peek at the private lives of some of modern history's most noteworthy—and notorious—figures. That's it's also an entirely enthralling piece of theater is icing on an already tasty little cake.

Moving Arts Theatre, 3191 Casitas Avenue, Los Angeles. Through June 6. Fridays and Saturdays at 8:00. Sundays at 4:00. Also Saturday June 5 at 8:00.
www.MovingArts.org

–Steven Stanley
May 9, 2025
Photos: Philip Pirolo