

Moonstruck - Lookingglass moved by Calvino's 'Luna'

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'La Luna Muda'

?176-129? Opens Saturday, to March 10

?176-129? Ruth Page Center for the Performing Arts, 1016 N. Dearborn

?176-129? Tickets, \$28.50 and \$33.50

Once again, Lookingglass Theatre is working its magic on a tale by Italian author Italo Calvino. In 1999, the company created a deeply moving production of "The Baron in the Trees," a Calvino tale about a nobleman who climbs into the trees one day and never again sets foot on earth. It was a showcase for the endlessly imaginative troupe and its penchant for integrating the circus arts into complex storytelling.

The current production, "La Luna Muda," is inspired by Calvino's story of the same name. The Calvino estate rigorously protects the author's works, so Lookingglass wasn't able to secure the rights to a direct adaptation. But adapter and director David Kersnar came up with a plan to tell the story through music, visuals and the acrobatic talents of his cast.

"It was a difficult task but we were tenacious," Kersnar said of the company's attempts to secure the story that is filled with contrasting and intriguing themes. "What Calvino does is combine all these scientific theories and mathematical properties, and then adds a human quality to them to uncover the universe."

There also is a thread of whimsy in "La Luna Muda" (Spanish for "the silent moon"), a tale that tells of a time when the distance between the moon and the Earth was so slight that once a month, when the moon was full, men and women could reach the lunar surface with only a rowboat and a ladder.

With that in mind, think of the creative possibilities that this heavenly moon traveling offers to a company that has for years been associated with, and taken classes at, the Actors Gymnasium. At first, Kersnar set out to do something completely visual—a silent film on stage filled with dazzling circus aerial moves, including tightrope walking, spinning, floating and juggling. But then he decided to take it deeper and add music.

Kersnar has a longtime interest in opera; he performed in operas as a child and began his studies at Northwestern University in the opera program before switching to theater.

"I love to watch singers come to life on stage," said Kersnar. "It's exciting to see music used in a way that is real; a direct line from the voice to the heart."

Kersnar and Lookingglass artistic director Laura Eason composed more than 20 songs, with original scoring and orchestration by artistic associate Eric Huffman and Ray Nardelli. (Eason also is one of the stars of the show, along with David Catlin, Lawrence R. DiStasi, Heidi Stillman and Tony Hernandez.)

The goal was to create songs that had "tuneful melodies that could be orchestrated by a more modern, electronic, computer-generated aesthetic," said Eason. "And we wanted the songs to speak to the magical journey the characters were experiencing."

Part of the charm of Calvino's adult fairy tales is his ability to take the scientific and meld it with human emotions.

"Calvino was brilliant at capturing the different connections of love, longing and lust," said Kersnar. "The things we all go through that have such an incredible power over us. There is something here for everyone to relate to."

Central to the set design is a moon that moves forward and back on the stage, filling its entire height and width. It's a work of mechanical genius, says Kersnar. Jeremy Kay's moon is dependent on balance, weight and force all applied with the touch of an engineer, albeit one with an artistic touch. The team also created several ladders that allow the actors to reach the moon. One particularly enchanting apparatus rocks, and is the vehicle used to reach the moon.

"It's impossible for us to pretend that the five people on stage are the only ones creating this work," said Kersnar. "Yet we aren't trying to put on a circus; we are trying to tell a story. And that's where we all merge, using all our different talents to tell the story."

Using all their talents--acting, singing, circus feats--was the biggest challenge for the five actors, says Eason.

"Sometimes it's like rubbing your stomach and patting your head at the same time," said Eason, laughing. "Trying to remember to do everything at once and do it consistently perfect can be tough. And it's an incredible challenge; one of the most complicated shows we've ever attempted."

Caption: Laura Eason, artistic director of Lookingglass Theatre, is one of the stars of the company's latest production, the ambitious "La Luna Muda."

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Lookingglass Theatre

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