

THEATER REVIEW

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'LA LUNA MUDA' SOMEWHAT RECOMMENDED

WHEN: Through March 10

WHERE: Lookingglass Theatre at the Ruth Page Center, 1016 N. Dearborn

TICKETS: \$28.50-\$33.50

CALL: (773) 477-8088

The Lookingglass Theatre Company is never afraid of experimentation, but not every experiment is successful.

Its newest piece, "La Luna Muda" ("The Silent Moon"), is delicate, poetic and lovely to look at. But this song-strewn stage adaptation of a story by the modern Italian fabulist Italo Calvino, suffers from what might be termed "lunar languor."

A co-production with the Actors' Gymnasium (the Evanston-based school that specializes in circus skills and physical theater techniques), the show is animated by tightrope-walking, and a variety of balancing acts, trapeze work and gymnastic routines. All of this is designed to simulate the magnetic lure of our planet's only satellite, the ever-changing moon, as well as the compulsively powerful, but often elusive pull of another person. But in its attempts to suggest the moonstruck states of its characters, the 80-minute show, which received its world premiere Saturday night at the Ruth Page Center for the Performing Arts, too often feels earthbound.

Based on "The Distant Moon," from Calvino's *Cosmicomics*--a collection of stories that provide whimsical illustrations of scientific principles--"La Luna Muda" reflects the author's lightly mythical style. But it falls into a tedious preciousness that Calvino scrupulously managed to avoid.

As we are told by the tales' dreamy narrator, Gabriel (Lawrence E. DiStasi), there was once a time when the moon was close enough to the earth that a boat could be rowed up to it, and people could step onto its surface. He knows this from experience as we realize when he begins to recount his adventures as a shiphand on one of those voyages, and explains how he fell hopelessly in love with the Captain's wife (Laura Eason, decked out in a dress of lush roses), when her husband, the Captain (David Catlin), became caught up in theoretical scientific matters and began to ignore her.

The Captain's wife had little romantic interest in Gabriel, but instead was enchanted by Gabriel's deaf cousin (Tony Hernandez), a pretty fellow, also part of the crew, who very much lived in his own world. Meanwhile, the Captain's young niece, Sierva Maria (Heidi Stillman), on the brink of womanhood, fell in love with Gabriel, and ultimately became his real-life wife.

So there you have it: five distracted people in the throes of unrequited love and longing as they come under the spell of a full moon.

As conceived and directed by David Kersnar and choreographed by Sylvia Hernandez DeStasi, the production is gentle-spirited, wistful and full of engaging stage pictures. In one perspective-altering sequence the travelers arrive on the crater-pocked moon and rotate on pegs as if weightless; in another, Gabriel and the Captain's wife are perched on opposite

ends of a ladder suspended in mid-air until they frenziedly begin rotating in quest of their very different passions.

Yet overall, there is a crucial momentum missing. And the nearly 20 soft, Euro-pop-style songs by Eason and Kersnar (orchestrated by Eric Huffman and Ray Nardelli), tend to have a pastel blandness as well.

Visually, "La Luna Muda" has the allure of an old-fashioned valentine as it plays out on Brian Sidney Bembridge's enchanting set--an antique Italian rococo theater with multiple red velvet curtains and a touch of what feels like gaslight, courtesy of lighting designer Ben Spicer. Susan Haas' costumes, with hints of Tiepolo and Fellini, are pure eye candy. Yet in the end, the show doesn't so much fly you to the moon as it lulls you to sleep.

Caption: Lookingglass Theatre's "La Luna Muda" stars (from left) Laura Eason, David Catlin, Heidi Stillman, Lawrence E. DiStasi and Tony Hernandez.

Section: SECTION 2; FEATURES

Page: 38

Column: THEATER REVIEW

Index Terms: NEWS; PLAYS

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