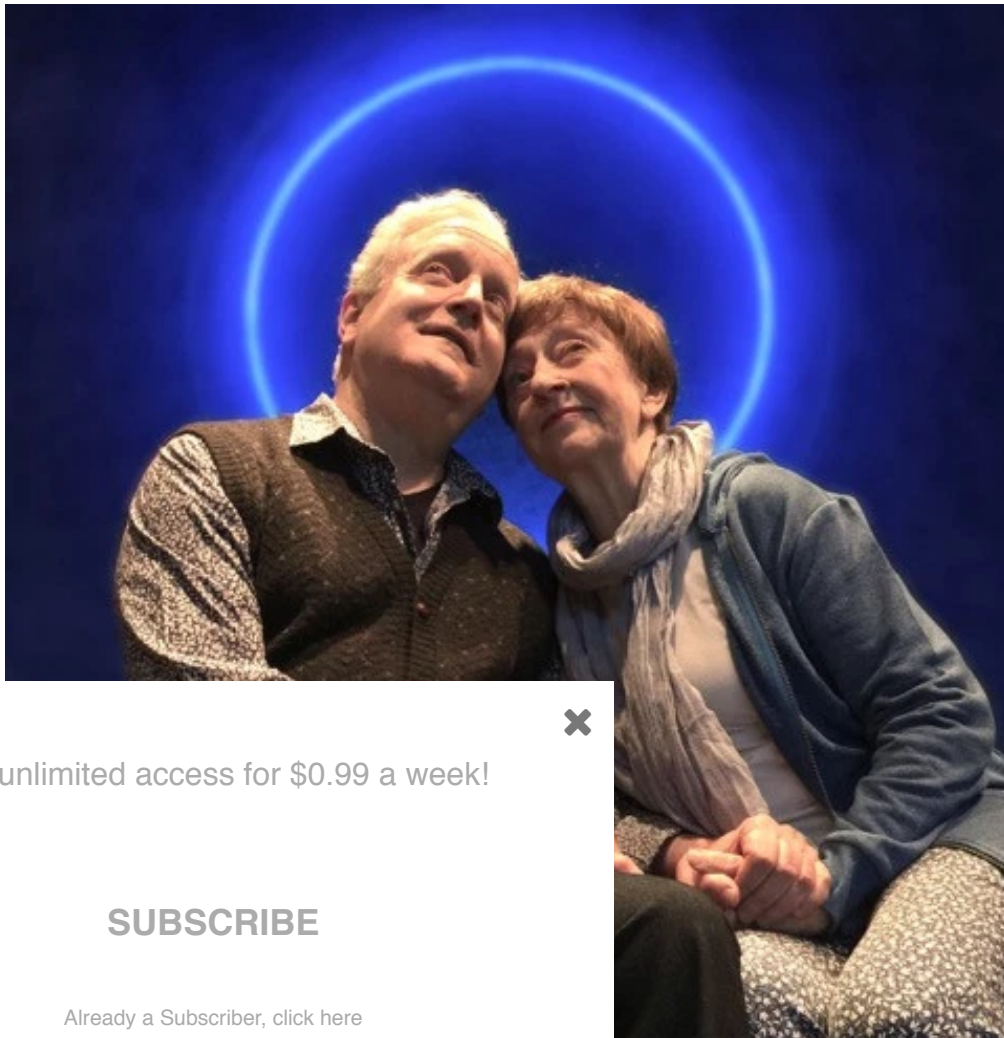

THINGS TO DO

Nautilus' 'Fantasticks' enhanced by age, gender twists



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Gary Briggie and Wendy Lehr are the young lovers in “The Fantasticks.” (Photo by Ben Krywosz)

By **DOMINIC P. PAPATOLA** | Special to the Pioneer Press

April 11, 2016 at 11:52 am

“The Fantasticks” is, by design, a wistful show; a story about perception versus reality and the hard life lessons that toughen us and make us, finally, worthy of enduring love.

In that sense, the musical that features a pair of young lovers and has been staged by thousands of high school drama departments over the years is very much a grownup’s play. So perhaps Nautilus Music-Theater’s take on the material isn’t as unconventional as it initially seems.

In director Ben Krywosz’s staging, real-life husband-and-wife [Gary Briggie and Wendy Lehr](#) play the 20-year-old Matt and the 16-year-old Luisa. To say that the couple are a little more seasoned than the performers usually cast doesn’t quite get at it. According to the program, Briggie first played Matt in 1970; Lehr played Luisa for the first time in the early ’60s.

But Briggie and Lehr are pros. They’re not attempting to imitate youth, nor are they necessarily remembering it. Like any good actors, they inhabit their roles and ask the audience to join them in willing suspension of disbelief. Approaching the role with surety and no excuses, the wrinkles fade pretty quickly and the performances glow.

Briggie summons callow charm effortlessly. His supple singing voice is easily up to the vocal demands of the role, but he allows himself to slide into a more conversational talk-singing mode from time to time.

And while many a skilled and pretty ingénue has played the second-act scene in which Luisa is jilted, I strenuously doubt any youngster could wordlessly play face and body through the emotions of anticipation, impatience, concern, dawning realization, disbelief and heartbreak with the lovely, nuanced alacrity Lehr brings to the moment.

Christina Baldwin and Jennifer Baldwin Peden play the fathers of Luisa and Matt, who have conspired to bring their children together by appearing to forbid their relationship. It wouldn't be surprising to anyone familiar with these singing siblings' work that "Never Say No" and "Plant a Radish" have perhaps never been sung more prettily. But, without resorting to caricature-y gender-bending, the sisters find the heart, humanity and humor in the roles, too.

William Gillness and Brian Sostek complete the cast as the play's narrator (and its main antagonist, El Gallo) and The Actor who Dies (a mash-up of two roles from the original off-Broadway production). The two couldn't be further apart in approaches to their roles: Gillness is arch, sophisticated and subdued; it looks like somebody slipped Sostek about 19 energy drinks before he went on stage to joyously animate most of the ham-actor stereotypes in existence. But their polar extremes act as a frame for the more concrete performances of their cast-mates.

"The Fantasticks" is an intimate show, rendered even more so in Nautilus' tiny Lowertown studio, with a stage so small the actors pretty much have to keep moving just to stay out of each other's way. But despite the motion — and the unusual casting — the staging feels at once grounded and light; gossamer as silk but with a surprising and enduring tensile strength.

IF YOU GO

What: "The Fantasticks"

When: Through April 16

Where: Nautilus Music-Theater, 308 Prince St., No.190, St. Paul

Tickets: \$40-\$30

Information: nautilusmusictheater.org

Capsule: A September worth remembering.

Tags: Theater



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