

## Royal Academy of Music – The Light in the Piazza

by Admin on Tuesday, 21 June, 2022 in Onstage, Review



Picture: Craig Fuller

*The Light in the Piazza* at the Royal Academy of Music's Susie Sainsbury Theatre, London.

Star rating: **five stars** ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Between Adam Guettel's sumptuous, demanding score, Craig Lucas' Italian language-heavy book, and a tradition of extravagantly beautiful scenic design, *The Light in the Piazza* is not an obvious choice for a student production. However, hardened by the last two years of pandemic-affected study, the students of the Royal Academy of Music have done an outstanding job of bringing this gorgeously romantic work to the stage.

*The Light in the Piazza* is based on a 1960 Elizabeth Spencer novella and 1962 Guy Green film of the same name. Margaret Johnson is dismayed when her daughter Clara falls in love

with local boy Fabrizio during a holiday to Florence, despite the young couple not sharing a language. Besides the usual motherly concern, Margaret wrestles with how far she should allow the relationship to progress given her daughter's learning difficulties, of which Fabrizio – perhaps because of the language barrier or overpowering love – seems completely unaware. Guettel's score is overwhelmingly romantic, but the thought-provoking ethical questions make this far from a straightforward piece.

As an audience member, half of you wants to see this show produced in a grand venue, to facilitate an enormous orchestra and elaborately beautiful set. However, the other half of you longs for a small, intimate production where one can best appreciate the emotional nuances. Somehow, this production has its panettone and eats it too. Despite the Susie Sainsbury Theatre being a relatively small venue, it is an attractive and well-equipped space. Set/costume designer Simon Kenny and lighting designer Charlie Morgan Jones have done a wondrous job in bringing the beauty of Florence to the stage, and the arrangements for the 16-piece band – led by musical director Lewis Bell – are glorious and sound huge.

Director Hannah Chissick has put together a piece where all elements gel perfectly. The stage is relatively large for such an intimate theatre, but Chris Whittaker's choreography effectively re-creates the bustle of an Italian city with this cast of 15. Every element is carefully tuned to generate the perfect romantic

atmosphere for this piece. It could even get away with a second rate cast, but after two years of lockdown, this group of students clearly are determined to give this show their all. The result is stunning.

As with many student productions, this show is double cast, with seven performers playing the lead roles for half of the engagements, then switching with the seven ensemble members for the rest. Only Leon Hong remains in place across both iterations, a young man who still has his work cut out for him taking on three characters and performing in three languages! He does a wonderful job, and his classmates are on equally solid form.

Sadly, I was only able to attend one performance, so I missed out on seeing 'Cast A'. However, all seven of this group gave committed, competent and energetic turns in the ensemble and I have no doubt their lead performances were every bit as good as this performance.

In 'Cast Z', Leonie Kappmeyer plays Margaret Johnson – a role that depends heavily upon the actor's ability to communicate her conflicting instincts of concern for her child's safety and desire for her happiness. Though at times she adopts the aura of a strict and traditional southern mother who might be a villain in another piece, Kappmeyer as Margaret is relentlessly relatable and sympathetic. Her singing voice is wonderful, and she develops brilliant chemistry with all her co-stars.

That knack for creating chemistry is shared by Neïma Naouri in her role as daughter Clara. The child-like wonder she exudes as she falls in love with Italy and its people is as charming as her spiralling mental health episodes are worrying. But at all times her reactions to Kappmeyer's Margaret make entirely real the mother-daughter relationship that is central to the piece. These performers have brilliant instincts for what benefits the piece as a whole. Despite virtuosic talents for acting and singing, the pair perform without ego and their choices make this *Light in the Piazza* as emotionally effective as any I've seen.

It must be daunting to be cast in a role that features a great deal of dialogue and singing in a language other than your own. My own Italian is too limited to offer judgements on the fluency of the five cast members playing the Naccarelli family, but all are reassuringly smooth and confident in their performances. Some of the funniest and most heart-warming scenes are the family moments where their delicious mix of relationships fizz and spark.

For such a young student, Robert Merriam brings a substantial amount of authority and class to the Naccarelli patriarch. Izzy Mackie plays his wife with attitude and volume, and frequently reduces the audience to laughter. Connor Wood and Crystal Lin play Fabrizio's brother and sister-in-law as a squabbling couple whose struggling relationship functions as a comic counterbalance to the main romance, but these performers ensure the love still shines through. All are given their moments to shine vocally and not one disappoints.

In some ways, Sebastian Harwood has the hardest job of all as Clara's admirer Fabrizio. Men following strange women around a city based on nothing but physical attraction isn't necessarily seen as romantic now as it was in 1960 when the novella came out, or even in 2003 at the first production of the musical. Fortunately, Harwood glows with wholesome good intentions. Despite constantly evolving worries about what form their relationship should take, we as an audience never want Clara and Fabrizio to be anything other than happy. The audience is completely on board with Harwood from his early showstopping performance of the song 'Passeggiata'.

I have long evangelised that for a fraction of the price of a West End show, student productions offer a wide selection of classic plays starring talented and committed performers in intimate and often more enjoyable venues. Despite strong competition, this production of *The Light in the Piazza* might be the best student production I have seen since the end of lockdown. Director Chissick and the team have done a spectacular job of allowing this cast of incredible talents to shine and bring new life to a familiar text. No

doubt we will see many of these future stars bringing down even bigger houses before too long.

*Ian Bowkett*

SHARE THIS POST:



### Join the Conversation

Sign up to receive news and updates from Musical Theatre Review. You can unsubscribe at any time by clicking the link in the footer of our emails. For information about our privacy practices, [click here](#).

**Chris Whittaker, Connor Wood, Crystal Lin, Hannah Chissick, Leon Hong, Leonie Kappmeyer, Neïma Naouri, Robert Merriam, Royal Academy of Music, Sebastian Harwood, Susie Sainsbury Theatre, The Light in the Piazza**

[◀ Phantom of the Opera – new cast and booking extended Programme and presenters for West End LIVE ▶](#)

---

## FOLLOW US

## SEARCH THE SITE

