

THEATRE REVIEW

She's bitter, he's adorable

BY NANCY STETSON
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Who do you turn to when you need advice on affairs of the heart?

Friends? Dear Abby? Dr. Phil?

Jane (Annie Wagner), a divorced woman, listens to her stepmother, Mamma Rose (Betty Madonna). Never mind that this was the woman who had an affair with Jane's father, causing him to leave his wife and marry her. Never mind she spouts enough malapropisms to be a Dickens character. Never mind that her advice, though possibly adequate for an earlier era, hasn't much relevance in today's world.

For some reason, Jane listens to her.

Even when she thinks she doesn't.

Sadly, Mamma Rose's negativity seeps into Jane's depths, causing her to doubt herself and potentially mess up a great romance.

"White socks at the door/
You'll end up on the floor," she says. (Mamma Rose fancies herself a poet and is forever spouting little inane jingles.)



COURTESY PHOTO

The cast of "Material Spirits," from the left, Betty Madonna, Annie Wagner and Jesse St. Louis.

Theatre CONSPIRACY

"Material Spirits," playing at Theatre Conspiracy, builds its house on this shaky foundation. Written by James Caputo, the piece won first place in Theater Conspiracy's tenth annual new play contest.

If this play were a boxing match, it'd definitely be light flyweight, which is even lighter than featherweight or welterweight. But you'd see some good punches and occasional fancy footwork.

"Material Spirits" is the inaugural production in Theatre Conspiracy's new locale (in an office strip mall on Park Windsor Drive, behind Sasse's restaurant.) The new space is rough, with exposed ductwork and a crazy quilt of chairs, stools and couches for seating.

It's informal, which works in the theater's favor. The theater's not polished and overly fancy, and neither is the play.

Jane and Frank (Jesse St. Louis) meet at a Starbucks in New York City. He's planned three blind dates via the personals that day, and is in the wrong place at the wrong time. He thinks Jane might be one of the three, but she isn't. And well, wouldn't you guess, the two get to talking.

Frank called himself "Steady and reli-

able" in his ad, which makes him sound like a stick-in-the mud, but he isn't. St. Louis plays him with a twinkle in his eye and much warmth. Despite Jane's wariness and previous negative experience with men, she's drawn to him. And so is the audience, because St. Louis gives such a powerfully vulnerable performance.

Wagner plays Jane as initially prickly and bitter. But Frank's low-key charm disarms her. That, and the fact that he loves theater. Jane loves theater too, and the two bond over this common passion.

But Jane's Mamma Rose gets in the act, phoning her constantly to give unneeded and unwise advice. (Don't expect him to help with the dishes, ask him questions because men like to explain things, talk about history and sports.) She also tells Jane she shouldn't invite unknown men to her apartment (OK, good advice) and claims that if he's wearing white socks, he's the Boston Strangler. (Huh?)

"White socks at the door/You'll end up on the floor," she says. (Mamma Rose fancies herself a poet and is forever spouting little inane jingles.)

Madonna's a well-loved actor in the area,

full of spunk, but this is not one of her better roles. It calls on her to speak in a New York Jewish accent, but Madonna just doesn't sell it, no matter how many times she says "bubele" or "ting" for "thing." Playwright Caputo might be referencing "Gypsy" in calling the Step-mom Mamma Rose, but this Mamma Rose isn't even half the tornado the original one was.

Jane has a great scene where she's talking to her step-mom on the speaker phone while trying on outfit after outfit for her upcoming date. (Phones figure heavily in this play.) She is alternately exasperated with her step-mom and her advice, and anxious about what to wear and how the night will go.

Patricia Clopton, as Jane's mother, shows up in Act II for a small but pivotal scene. Dressed all in white, she looks like the dead mother in the TV show "Providence," who would pop up from time to time. Clopton has some great lines, but the waiter jokes intended to show the mother-daughter connection fall flat. I found myself wishing that Caputo had worked a little harder to demonstrate the close-knit relationship the two possessed.

But it's the interactions between Wagner and St. Louis that make this play work. Their strong performances are the glue that hold this play together. You start rooting for them when they start discussing their mutual love of theater and Emily Dickinson.

Sure, some of the plot devices have been used before — and with much more effectiveness — on TV shows and in other plays. Though paper-thin at times, the play also has some great moments.

But it's Wagner and St. Louis who run away with the show. She's bitter and scared, he's vulnerable and adorable. It's a match made in heaven. ■

If you go

- >>What: "Maternal Spirits"
- >>When: through March 15; 8 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday, 2 p.m. Sunday
- >>Where: Theatre Conspiracy, 2711 Park Windsor Drive #302, Fort Myers, behind Sasse's restaurant
- >>Cost: \$20 (\$10 for students)
- >>Information: Call 936-3239

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