

Theater Review: ‘Picasso’ riotous as performed at UA theatre

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We were promised a stageful of Steve Martin, and that’s pretty much what you get in the University of Alabama Department of Theatre and Dance’s production of “Picasso at the Lapin Agile.”

Any fan knows Martin is more than the white-suited goof persona of “The Jerk” or the “Pink Panther” remakes. He’s also capable of the poetic, sunny swains of “Roxanne” and “L.A. Story,” the blustering buffoon of “Three Amigos,” the dark and intense lovelorn man in “Shopgirl.”

It’s no coincidence Martin wrote or co-wrote all of the above, and “Picasso,” being his first play, collapses a lot of that sense of whimsy and wonder into a taut 80-minute comedy of ideas. Of his movies, it’s probably most like “L.A. Story” in high-flown imagination anchored with slapstick bravado, leavened with a wide romantic streak.

Einstein (David Bolus) and Picasso (Elliot Moon) meet at a bistro whose name translates, roughly, to Nimble Rabbit, which must have appealed to the writer’s sense of silly. A duel commences over which of the yet unsung men — Einstein is still working on the relativity theory, and Picasso hasn’t yet burst into Cubism — will define the 20th century. And which will get the girl, of course. Or girls.

Director Marian Mantovani believes in letting the comedy loose, and the rest will follow. Inner clowns were set free, with the performances almost recklessly uninhibited. It’s a delightful piece to watch, from the cartoonishly vivid portrayals to quick costume jokes to shadow play from the bathroom (that nearly upstages some otherwise fine moments) to a Lapin Agile set that is nimble indeed, during a late transformation from literal to figurative and poetic, neatly underscoring the plans of the collected geniuses to show the world a new way to look at itself.

In taking his Einstein over the top, down to the valleys and back over the next peak, Bolus doesn’t so much run away with the play as force everyone else to keep up with his pace, a rocket in a runaway rollercoaster. His rubbery facial mobility alone could rank him among the silent-comic masters, but he’s also capable of flinging his body around like a young Buster Keaton.

And then there’s that Einstein accent. Many of the actors took the voices to extremes, as if inspired by the Frenchman from “Monty Python and the Holy Grail”: “Why d’you think I haf this outraaageous accent, you silly king?” You probably won’t catch



staff photo | andrea mabry

The cast of Steve Martin’s “Picasso at the Lapin Agile” perform a scene from the show during a rehearsal in the Marian Gallaway Theatre on the University of Alabama campus on Nov. 2. The show, directed by Marian Mantovani, is running through Nov. 15.

every word, which I'm not sure is intended. You might find yourself reacting not to literal meanings but gist, as many modern audiences hear Shakespeare. That's a shame, because for anyone who's read or seen this play before, you'll know there's meat there to be savored, ideas that deserve a bit of rumination.

On the other hand, you don't really need to slow down to get jokes about how Picasso "likes blue"; you just need to understand the reference to the painter's "blue period," just before he broke out. It's that kind of clever; you don't have to get it, but if you get it, you got it.

As noted, the director keeps it fast and furious, so something had to give. When lines aren't obscured by out-raageous accents, some fly over as frenetic onstage physicality. But if it's a tug-of-war between perfect intelligibility and pure enjoyment, then fun clearly wins the night.

Martin intended this melding of high and lowbrow. It's right there in the script. This is one comedy where bringing the actors out into the audience and breaking that wall is not only warranted but perfect. There's just enough bending of convention to get the laughs without falling into too-broad pantomime.

Sparks fly from the moment the avid, energetic Matt Lewis enters the stage, ably setting the tone and volume as Freddy. As Germaine, his wife and possibly the actual smartest person in the joint, Amber Gibson builds a solid core for the show to spin around, all the more remarkable for her being a freshman at UA and the youngest person in the cast, playing with graduate students and experienced community performers such as Charles Prosser, a huge laugh-getter as the aging yet still lively Gaston.

Moon throws himself, quite literally, into a Picasso carving, as much of a lust for life as for his painting. The show pulls out not only its biggest laughs but espouses its highest ideals in the gunslinger showdowns between Moon and Bolus.

All the supporting players have made it a mission to stamp themselves indelibly on the audience's brainpans. Katie Burton kicks her salacious Suzanne into such high gear the stage misses her when she's gone. Timothy Rhoades sashays a slimy Sagot, and Erica Hansen lights up the Countess. Nicholas J. Shabel and Allie Ficken nab some of the funniest moments with pure pomposity, and in Ficken's case, very able clowning. Joel Ingram ambles on amiably as the mysterious Visitor to put the right topping on this cheesecake.

Martin, Mantovani, cast and crew want everything, and they mostly get it: They want to redefine the universe, to paint it for you, and then to sing you songs of love.

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