

Published November 4th, 2015

"Chaste: An Awful Comedy" at SMC is Anything But

By A.K. Carroll



From left: Michael Craigen, Kimiya Shokri and Jack Clifford Photo Stanislava Georgieva

Running Nov. 5-8 in the LeFevre Theatre, the "awful comedy," as Prestininzi calls it, features a trio of passionate young thinkers (one woman and two men) who are determined to cooperatively live up to their high-minded ideals, fighting the pressures of jealousy, lust and ego in the process. "It's very much about the kind of dilemmas that young people (certainly students) will relate to," said Engle.

Inspired by the real life encounter between philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (played by Michael Craigen) and proto-feminist Lou Salomé (Kimiya Shokri), and the real-life characters of Paul Ree (Jack Clifford) and Elisabeth Nietzsche (alumna Kathleen Esling), the play is set in a sacred mountain town in Germanic Europe at the end of the 19th century, as well as in the metaphysical imaginations of the characters.

"The characters want to live in the future," said Engle, "so the set (designed by resident Deanna Zibello and inspired by turn of the century paintings) was created in the spirit of the 20th century. The look and feel of the show will be very modern."

Though the account depicted on stage didn't actually happen, Engle finds the fact that characters are based on real people "simply delicious."

Prestininzi discovered Lou Andreas Salomé (the main female character in "Chaste") while working on a play about Bohemian poet Rainer Maria Rilke. "I specifically studied her at this time in her life, which is basically the start of her independence and as a woman on the thinkers' stage," said Prestininzi.

The play was originally produced in 2009 by Trap Door Theatre in Chicago. It is a genre that Prestininzi calls "the awful comedy" and describes as "that place of comedy where to survive, you have to laugh."

No historic background or pre-reading is required. What really drives "Chaste" forward is the depth of emotion and passion felt by each character. "The issues of sexuality and power and one's individual relationship to God are charged issues," said Prestininzi. "(The characters) are open and reckless with that, which will translate to any adult audience."

Prestininzi came out early in the season to work with the cast and to speak to the production crew. "They had such a strong connection and understanding of the text," he said. "I'm really excited to see them go deeper with it."

When theater director and professor at Saint Mary's College, Rebecca Engle, came across a New York Times review of Ken Prestininzi's play "Chaste: An Awful Comedy," Engle knew it would be a perfect production to put on at Saint Mary's.

"Our directors choose plays which speak to them and which they think will speak to the students, the campus community and our neighbors beyond," explained Engle. Having met Prestininzi through the Bay Area theatre festival many years earlier, coming across the review was an experience that Engle likened to "(finding) a message in a bottle."

"I always have my ear open for a play that will work well for college age actors, looking for scenes that will speak to a young audience," said Engle. She believes that "Chaste" is just that sort of play. "Any student who's ever said to anyone else 'let's just be friends' - that's what this play is about."

Engle echoed the playwright's sentiment, referring to the cast as "a quartet of outstanding actors. Each of their voices weaves in and out of the play. (There are) moments of dissonance and harmony, and all of the possibilities you can have when you have four voices."

The question of ultimate chastity is, as the play's title would suggest, another key tension that moves the plot forward, one that Prestininzi describes as the conundrum of minds being encased by bodies and emotions. "Those are issues I find undergrads get on a very gut level," he said.

"I'm excited to see how that lands. I think one audience might take it to a very emotional place and another might take it in a place of high recognition. There are many ways you root for the young woman and other ways you are horrified at what youth can be. I think the audience will go back and forth with that. I'm very interested to see what will happen."

Tickets for "Chaste" are \$8-12 and can be purchased at the box office or online at <https://www.stmarys-ca.edu/chaste-an-awful-comedy>.

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA