

Singing elevates 'Bridges of Madison County' above its source material



Intermission wasn't yet over and the house lights were still up when actors Steve Koehler and Cory Goodrich climbed into the big bed at center stage to pick up where they'd left off as Robert and Francesca, the lovers who've crossed into forbidden country in "[The Bridges of Madison County](#)."

That brightly lit display of public affection is among director Elizabeth Margolius's many ingeniously staged moments in Fish Creek's Peninsula Players Theatre production of this Jason Robert

Brown (music and lyrics) and Marsha Norman (book) musical, an adaptation of Robert James Waller's 1993 novel.

Like the lovers in every adulterous affair, Robert and Francesca imagine themselves unique and alone – even when they're not only being watched by the Iowa town where Francesca lives, but also by an entire audience of Wisconsin theatergoers that's endured some fairly corny dialogue in the show's first half.

Margolius's staging never lets us forget that every affair affects more than the two people at its epicenter. This extra intermission tryst also drives home how indulgent and even tawdry such affairs can be.

But for "Bridges" to work, we must simultaneously feel for the Iowa farm wife and National Geographic photographer, falling into each other's arms while Francesca's husband and kids are at the State Fair. Waller's novel may be poorly written melodrama, but 60 million people have purchased copies. Even if his book is slathered in cheese, we dismiss it at our peril.

There's nothing dismissive about this production, which opens with Goodrich upstage and very much alone, singing Francesca's story as an Italian war bride set down among the cornfields by Bud (Karl Hamilton), a good if stolid man devoted to her and the couple's two children: 16-year-old Michael (Henry McGinniss) and 14-year-old Carolyn (Katherine Duffy).

As she slowly moves downstage along the switchbacks on Jack Magaw's smart and spare set, Goodrich sheds the clothes from her Italian past to don the housedress and apron that mark her as a 1965 homemaker, 18 years removed from the dreamy girl she'd once been.

PROGRAM NOTES

The World Around Us: Francesca's Iowa community may continually watch her, but in this production they're more apt to be empathetic than judgmental when doing so. Margolius' cast helps Francesca dress. They move props, thereby enabling the affair they witness. And in the guise of remarkably sympathetic, long-married neighbors Charlie (James Rank) and Marge (Rengin Altay), they not only keep Francesca's secret, but also take proactive steps to ensure she isn't discovered.

When I'd encountered Francesca's fellow Iowans in the recent Marriott production, I'd dismissed them in [my review](#) as "a colorless collection of good-hearted but often small-minded rubes." Played straight at Peninsula rather than for laughs as at Marriott, that community earns our respect, making Francesca's dilemma and ultimate choice all the harder.

Related: [Milwaukee native Nathaniel Stampley shines in 'The Bridges of Madison County'](#)

All in the Family: Ditto the effect wrought by Francesca's immediate family, all three of whose members are ably represented in this production. They're not fools – particularly important when it comes to Bud, played here by Hamilton as more observant, open-minded and tolerant than he might initially seem. Both McGinniss and Duffy present way more than teens with 'tudes; we're instead given two hyper-aware young people who only act out because they want to be loved, at an age when nothing seems sure and insecurities run rampant.

Duffy is both a ball of nervous energy and suggestive of the sensitive and vulnerable soul Francesca was and is. Marriott's production used a second, non-speaking actor to conjure images of the younger Francesca. No need for such an extra, here: in embodying a mother's daughter, Duffy simultaneously conjures images of Francesca's younger and more hopeful self.

It's not just the longing in Goodrich's glorious voice and in Brown's long and aching vocal lines that tell us this woman, like so many of the characters in this show, yearns for an irrecoverable world in which she was once young.

That nostalgia is also apparent in Margolius's staging, which evokes a continually receding and increasingly mythic past.

The iconic characters stationed upstage – moving slowly and even portentously – are preserved as cherished snapshots, removed from the hurly-burly of the downstage present. In a musical that's preternaturally aware of time, that past is forever young. "In this minute, I'm not getting older," Francesca sings as she falls for Robert.

Having spent his life as a photographer, Robert knows all about trying to shoot and stop time.

Watching Koehler's wolfish face and hungry eyes, it's easy to read Robert's infatuation as a midlife crisis, involving a man growing old and getting desperate. But Koehler's splendid voice is a picture window revealing a poet's soul, reflecting a man for whom this ostensible fling is actually an earth-shaking love for the ages. Is that enough?

Waller gave that question little thought; Norman's book tries to make it harder by giving more air time to Francesca's family and Iowa neighbors, all of them sharpening the double-edged sword suggested by a song entitled "You're Never Alone." That early number makes clear that Francesca is surrounded by love. But it also makes clear she's surrounded.

On a smaller stage – or when presented in the round, as "Bridges" recently was at Marriott Theatre in Lincolnshire – that communal embrace can feel claustrophobic.

On a proscenium stage at Peninsula that can seem as empty and expansive as Iowa itself, that larger community becomes indispensable. From Duffy's nervously needy teenage girl to the older couple next door, they're all sympathetically presented here. They're among the bridges in this "Madison County," offering passage in a world where crossing over is never easy.

"The Bridges of Madison County" continues through Aug. 13 at Peninsula Players Theatre, 4351 Peninsula Players Road, Fish Creek. For tickets and directions, visit www.peninsulaplayers.com/. Read more about this production at TapMilwaukee.com.

Changing Perspective: As suggested above, Goodrich herself also manages to embody both younger and older versions of Francesca – particularly in the show's opening number, as she moves downstage, shedding her Italian past to inhabit her lowan present. Margolius is adept at playing such perspectival tricks on us, involving an upstage world moving back toward a receding horizon while characters downstage live and move in the here and now. She's equally adept at staging various moments involving flashbacks or involving simultaneously unfolding scenes (such as all of those during which Bud and the kids call her from the road). Collectively, all of these moments underscore that space as well as time unfold in many dimensions at once; collectively, that is, these moments further emphasize that one is never truly alone. Even when living within one's darkest thoughts, in deepest rural Iowa.

Building Bridges and Making Music: Instead we're always building and crossing bridges that bring us together. Magaw's scenic design captures how hard that can be; for much of the play, pieces of this Iowa's bridges tend to float alone – suspended above us and as isolated as the people in this story can be. They slowly come together much as Brown's exceptional score slowly erases the distinctions between Robert's twangy, country-inflected New World sound and Francesca's deeper, darker Old World variant, enabling the harmonies through which these lovers fall into each other.

Beyond Language: Fresh from a week at Ontario's Stratford Festival – where nearly all of the ten shows I saw involved women for whom both societal codes and language itself continually fail to convey their hopes and dreams – I was particularly struck during this "Bridges" by Francesca's conviction that words couldn't possibly capture what she feels. "Whatever this is . . . don't give it a name," she imploringly sings to Robert. "We mustn't reduce it to something clear and simple."

It's good, much-needed advice; one wishes Norman had consistently heeded it in writing the show's underwhelming book. Particularly in the first act, some of the dialogue between these would-be lovers is laughably bad, reducing Koehler to a stagey, dime-store version of the Marlboro Man. Things improve whenever Goodrich or Koehler burst into song – a tribute to Brown's ravishing score and two leads who can handle its punishing demands. There are also some honest silences and seemingly insurmountable distances built into this story, particularly as staged at Peninsula. Those pluses far outweigh the minuses – ultimately suggesting, as every good musical does, that some things just can't be put into words. Strange but true: Taken in the aggregate, Brown's music is truer to the heart of Waller's story than was Waller himself.