

## Opinion

# Apple Pie In Hell's Kitchen

"Expecting your arrival tomorrow, I find myself thinking *I love you*: then comes the thought — *I should like to write a poem which would express exactly what I mean when I think these words.*"

— W. H. Auden

It's hard to imagine a sweeter, funnier, more all-American play than "Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune." It's right up there with Mom's apple pie — that is, if Mom's cooking ever handed you a laugh.

*Maria Pessino's production of Terrence McNally's "Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune" is one of the most moving evenings of theater this reviewer has ever had the joy of attending. Don't miss it! It is a pure delight.*

But it's also a deep-dish creation, and Mr. McNally has something profound to say. It deals, like Auden's work, with the heroic struggle of ordinary people to say "I love you," and somehow express exactly-what-they-mean.

### Extraordinary

Forget the movie. We knew Michelle Pfeiffer never slung hash in her life, despite her much-publicized lack of makeup. And Al Pacino, great actor though he is, hardly came across as a short-order cook.

Kathy Bates and F. Murray Abraham must have seemed like real people when the play first opened at City Center in New York in 1987, but this is today, and now we have Andrea Gross and John Monteleone, directed by Maria Pessino, who do an absolutely extraordinary job.

The play is set in Frankie's one-room walk-up near Hell's Kitchen, its only furniture a TV set, a fridge/stove unit, a stool, and an unmade bed.

At curtain's rise the stage is dark. We hear the sounds of a man and a woman making noisy, graphic love,

### PATSY SOUTHGATE

Most lovers are content to mutter sweet nothings and get on with their day, but Mr. McNally's characters have been knocked around. They back off, rephrase, deepen, clarify. This is their last chance at connecting, and for once, they've got to get it right.

Like Auden's famous unwritten poem in prose, "Dichtung und Wahrheit," 50 paragraphs on *I love you*, 50 stabs at saying exactly-what-you-mean, "Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune" is a dramatization of the formidable effort required to create intimacy — the "labor of love" love really is.



"FRANKIE AND JOHNNY in the Clair de Lune," starring Andrea Gross and John Monteleone, will have four more performances at Renee Fotouh Fine Art East.  
Clara Christine Newsum.

### Play It Again

An all-night disk jockey plays Debussy's "Clair de Lune," which Frankie thinks is the most beautiful music she's ever heard. Johnny calls in to ask him to play it again, for Frankie and Johnny, but the announcer says he never takes requests.

As dawn breaks, however, Frankie and Johnny sit side by side on the bed peacefully brushing their teeth while the disk jockey, miraculously, plays "Clair de Lune" again, for them. They've been saying "I love you" all night, in a million different ways, and finally, it has come to be exactly what they mean.

Ms. Pessino's production, presented by Oddfellows Playhouse and Jacqui Leader at the Renee Fotouh gallery, is one of the most moving evenings of theater this reviewer has ever had the joy of attending.

John Monteleone, an experienced actor, is wonderful as Johnny. But the real discovery is the stunning dramatic power of Andrea Gross, whose every gesture, every glance, glows with feeling and intelligence. It's hard to take our eyes off her. She is a revelation.

"Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune" will play again this weekend. Don't miss it! It is a pure delight.

followed by Bach's "Goldberg Variations" on the radio. The lights come up.

### High-Risk Stuff

Frankie (Ms. Gross) works as waitress in the same joint where Johnny (Mr. Monteleone) cook. They've noticed each other, gone out on a date, and she's asked him to come up. Now she wishes he'd leave. She feels like eating ice cream and watching TV, her usual routine: home alone, but Johnny's not about to go.

So they embark on the funny, safe, brave task of getting to know each other, and we go along for the ride.

They lie about their ages and squabble about everything from a meatloaf sandwich to the Beatles, asserting their human importance, insisting on their own truths. They drag their pasts out into the open — high-risk stuff: she can't have children, he's done time.

They endure tough confrontations and soar in leaps of faith. They are not used to tenderness, and for them, it's a terrifying challenge.