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50 Cents

Frankie And Johnny Connect

By Bridget LeRoy

Well, I'll admit it. Although scenes from Terrence McNally's *Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune* must be as rife within the casting room or monologue classes of New York as "What I Did For Love" was on the cabaret scene in the late '70s, I have never seen any of it. When the movie *Frankie and Johnny* came out, with Al Pacino and Michelle Pfeiffer, I passed that up as well. I knew that *F & J*, in the grand tradition of works from *Romeo and Juliet* through *Marty*, was the tale of two lonely misfits, a short-order cook and a waitress who buck the odds and start a romance. If Pfeiffer is a misfit, then what am I? Sure, they could glue another cold sore on her mouth (like they did in *The Witches of Eastwick*) but let's

guard by Johnny's confession of love and refusal to leave. Amazing coincidences appear in their pasts as the walls break down. And the question — in ways both amusing and heartbreaking — keeps resurfacing: Can Frankie and Johnny find true love (or at least complacency) before the night is through?

Perfectly Set

The play was staged in the Renee Fotouhi Gallery on Newtown Lane, a place perhaps not usually thought of as conducive to live theater. But this play, which takes place in Frankie's cramped New York apartment, is perfectly set in the small space by director Maria Pessino, who uses every corner and niche. It gives the audience a feeling (not unpleasant) of being in the same room with the actors rather than



Johnny pontificates, Frankie acts disinterested.

Clara-Christine Newman Photo



James J. Mackin Photo

John Monteleone and Andrea Gross connecting in *Frankie and Johnny*.

get real here.

And reality is what *F & J* is all about. It's about real people with real emotions, trying to make lasting connections and a difference in someone else's life. It's about desperation, hope, anger, humor, sorrow, love. The entire play, which begins with a noisy orgasm in the dark, takes place during the post-coital hours of Frankie and Johnny's first date. Putting up her defenses immediately ("Do you want a sandwich before you go?"), Frankie is thrown off

removed by a huge proscenium and dangling velvet curtains. This closeness makes them all the more real to us — we see the whites of their eyes, their fillings, their perspiration.

The actors were made for these roles.

It was an inspired piece of casting. John Monteleone plays Johnny with such vigor and energy that he could easily overwhelm the audience and make them feel uncomfortable, but he doesn't. What a difficult fine line to tread — to play an enthusiastic, slightly

crazy, Shakespeare-quoting hashslinger who refuses to leave a girl's apartment after having sex — but to play it without expressing a sense of evil. Never once does the audience feel that Frankie is in physical danger — he's nuts, but he's harmless.

Andrea Gross plays wisecracking, overweight Frankie — who can't wait for her lover to get dressed and get out — with a glimmer of hope beneath the surface at all times; it shows through her eyes, it shines through her face. Her cathartic moment is heartbreakingly

real, the penultimate confessions of a woman whose mother abandoned her in a world where angels of mercy are beaten up by their husbands, lifelong marriages mean an end to conversation, and the moon can turn you into a wolf.

The story is a classic, and the production meritorious. To experience good, live theater in an "alternative space," see *Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune*. Performances run from tomorrow through Sunday. Call 324-5797, between 3 and 6 p.m. for tickets.