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'Enchanted April'

A delightful evening in an intimate setting with superb performances

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By Bob Brown



From left: Carol Thompson, Virginia Barrie, and Kyla Mostello Donnelly in Enchanted April.

IT may be an unusually chilly spring, but it's a warm April over at the Heritage Center in Morristown, Pa., where Matthew Barber's *Enchanted April* is playing through May 12. Mr. Barber's 2003 play is one of several theatrical adaptations of Elizabeth Von Arnim's 1922 novel. Mike Newell's popular film of 1992 won three Oscars and a few Golden Globes.

This is a light comedy with a simple message: When marriages turn south, a restorative trip to an idyllic Italian retreat will set things right. If that were true, Perillo Tours would put marriage counselors out of business.

The characters in this play are uncomplicated, but they are each very distinctive. Lotty Wilton (Carol Thompson), a woman of a certain age, is depressed by the dreary London weather, which perfectly reflects the state of her marriage to Mellersh (C. Jameson Bradley). Spotting an advert for a castle to let on an Italian island, Lotty is emboldened to ask a fellow ladies'-club member Rose Arnott (Kyla Mostello Donnelly) if she would go in on the rental with her.

The two hardly know each other. Lotty is impulsive. But Rose is reluctant, even though she has her own frustrations with husband Frederick (Curtis Kaine). Screwing up their courage, the two find a couple of more women to spread the costs: Lady Caroline Bramble (Cat Miller), a gorgeous, aloof young socialite who wants to escape London's tedium; and Mrs. Graves (Virginia Barrie), a proper bluestocking who name-drops her father's connections to the greats of a previous era.

The weather and the mood brighten considerably when everyone arrives at the castle in Mezzago. The only challenge is communicating with the caretakers Costanza (Cheryl Doyle) and Marco (Marco Newton), who speak no English, but are amused at the Brits' cultural naiveté.

Lotty is the cheerleader, urging everyone out to enjoy the sun and sea, lifting Rose out of her blue funk and pushing against Mrs. Graves' natural tendency to find fault everywhere. The castle's owner, Englishman Anthony Wilding (Michael Wurzel), joins the women and develops a special affection for Rose.

Although they have come to get away from London, the carefree, florid setting and the blue skies inspire Lotty to invite Mellersh — and in turn to urge Rose to invite Frederick — to join them at this enchanted retreat. The results are, not surprisingly, rewarding both romantically and psychically.

Under the sure-handed direction of George Hartpence (who also designed the magically transforming scenery from Act 1 to Act 2), the play blossoms beautifully. In fact, of the many productions I've seen at Actors' NET over the past few years, this is one of the most polished and entertaining. Casting has a lot to do with it. As Mr. Hartpence says in his director's note, "We have assembled the finest cast of actors for this show that you'll see in any theater — community or professional." I'll forgive his bias in that Ms. Thompson is his wife and also co-directs. But I have to agree wholeheartedly. She's infectiously upbeat as Lotty, bursting with joie de vivre. As a counterpoint, Ms. Donnelly's Rose is hesitant and cautious, gradually transforming in the course of the play to become a passionate creature who rediscovers love for the man she married. Ms. Miller is the picture of haughty indifference — except that she's hiding a deep hurt.

This is really the women's play, but Mr. Bradley and Mr. Kaine undergo their own character transitions as their hearts and minds are melted by their spouses and the setting. We see that Mr. Arnott must have had a history with Lady Caroline, but it's snuffed out by the overwhelming affection of the rejuvenated Rose. Finally, although their roles are small, Ms. Doyle and Mr. Newton are spot-on and amusing as the Italian caretakers. Aaron Gutter is credited as "Italian Language Coach," and he does a bang-up job. Costumes, eye-catching and plentiful, are designed by Arlene Kohler. The mood is also enhanced by scene-shifting background music.

I want to reemphasize what Mr. Hartpence says about the quality. Having seen *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* on Broadway recently, and from



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expensive seats that were miles from the stage, I was delighted to enjoy Ms. Barber's play in an intimate setting with superb performances. It's really a treasure to have dedicated local producers like Joe and Cheryl Doyle, who can present such quality productions with local talent at a fraction of Broadway prices. It's one enchanted evening.

Enchanted April continues at the Heritage Center, 635 N. Delmorr Ave., Morrisville, Pa., through May 12. Performances: Fri.-Sat. 8 p.m., Sun. 2 p.m. Tickets cost \$10-\$20; www.actorsnetbucks.org; 215-295-3694



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