

Theater Review: 'Light in the Piazza' Shines at Chicago's Lyric Opera, thru Dec. 29, 2019

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on December 19, 2019 - 11:21am

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CHICAGO – Love is a powerful enough force to transcend any obstacle that you may put in its path. That seems to be the dominant theme of the beloved Tony Award-winning musical “The Light in the Piazza,” which is enjoying a very limited holiday engagement at the Lyric Opera House through December 29th, 2019, [Click here](#) [17] for more details and tickets..

Presented by Scenario Two, a new commercial theatrical production company based in London, this sparkling new production of “The Light in the Piazza” is having a bit of a sentimental homecoming. The show had its Midwest premiere at Chicago's Goodman Theatre in 2004 before transferring to Broadway in 2005, and it now stars the world-renowned soprano Renée Fleming, who is Creative Consultant to Lyric Opera of Chicago.



Play Rating: **5.0/5.0**

Margaret Johnson (Renée Fleming), a well heeled and cultured North Carolina wife and mother is traveling throughout Italy with her daughter Clara (Solea Pfeiffer) in the summer of 1953. While seeing the sights in Florence and taking a casual stroll through the Piazza della Signoria, a gust of wind blows Clara's hat off of her head. It is quickly retrieved by the passionate Fabrizio Naccarelli (Rob Houchen) who is instantly smitten with Clara. Not completely comfortable with his command of the English language, Fabrizio manages to communicate with Margaret and Clara in his broken English – and Clara even candidly reveals to him the name of the hotel in which she and her mother are staying, much to Margaret's dismay.



Lyric Opera of Chicago Presents Renée Fleming in 'Light in the Piazza'

Photo credit: Liz Lauren for Scenario Two

Fabrizio mentions that his father owns a shop that sells stylish menswear and invites them to visit him there. Margaret won't even consider the offer as she is extremely overprotective of her daughter, whom she refers to as a special child. Determined to be able to spend time with Clara while she is visiting Florence and undeterred by any barriers that Margaret may place in his way, Fabrizio perseveres and reencounters the American mother and daughter as they are leaving the galleries of the Uffizi the following day. Gradually Fabrizio ingratiates himself into Margaret's slightly apprehensive embrace and Clara is rapidly falling in love with him. Soon they are invited into the Naccarelli home where they meet Fabrizio's liberal-minded father Signor Naccarelli (Alex Jennings) and domineering mother Signora Nacarelli (Marie McLaughlin) as well as his older brother Giuseppe (Eric Sciotto) and his cynical and jealous wife Franca (Suzanne Kantorski).

As the mutual amorous feelings swiftly develop between the two young lovers, Margaret decides that she and Clara must flee to Rome for fear that the dark secret that has haunted Clara's past will come to light. Without informing Fabrizio of this plan, Margaret and Clara abruptly leave Florence and deprive Clara of saying her farewells to her sweetheart. A heartbroken Clara resents her mother and sulks while touring the Roman ruins. Margaret realizes that she cannot control every aspect of her daughter's life any longer nor can she be responsible for preventing a future filled with happiness that the young woman so justly deserves.

Renée Fleming is simply ravishing as Margaret. Her commanding soprano is still impeccable and she remains one of the foremost singing actors of her generation. While she is well regarded as a master of dramatic interpretation, what is a refreshing revelation here is her expert comedic timing. Who knew that she could be so effusively humorous? Her Margaret is profoundly complex, somewhat tortured but always played with Fleming's wondrous and generous sincerity.



Renée Fleming and Solea Pfeiffer in 'Light in the Piazza'

Photo credit: Liz Lauren for Scenario Two

Pfeiffer, who is debuting in the role of Clara, is marvelous at portraying subtle flourishes of naiveté plus bursts of joy for her newly awakened affection and is gifted with a sublimely pristine soprano of her own. The Brit rising star Houchen is magnificent as the charming Fabrizio, his superb voice is just as glorious as many of the countless celebrated tenors who have trod the boards on this very stage over the course of the past six and a half decades. Jennings, who is a three-time Olivier Award-winning veteran of the West End stage (and may be most recognizable to American audiences for his work on Netflix's "The Crown") is the perfect Florentine gentleman Signor Naccarelli, especially because nearly half of his lines in Act One are spoken in Italian. He and Fleming are delightful as they wistfully learn the art of compromise in the musical number "Let's Walk" late in the second act.

Many of the core members of this cast (including Fleming, Houchen and Jennings) were given the chance to perfect their respective roles earlier when this production was presented in London this past June. One additional actor reprising his role from that original London production is Malcolm Sinclair – who plays Roy Johnson, Margaret's husband who is an executive in a large cigarette manufacturing firm. Sinclair is quite amusing in the two brief scenes in which he is featured, one in each act, on the other end of trans-Atlantic long distance phone line when Margaret calls home for some much needed advice and consultation.

The entire ensemble, however, is remarkably adept as they dig deeply into composer Adam Guettel's lushly romantic and intoxicating score. The book by Craig Lucas, based upon Elizabeth Spencer's famous novella, is more sensitive and naturally realistic than the 1962 film version. Conductor Kimberly Grigsby elicits rapturous tones from the 30-piece orchestra. This is a work that she is very familiar with, having been at the helm during the entire run of the original Broadway production. Director Daniel Evans, proving once again his astute artistic capabilities in

regards to handling a challenging musical, has created action which appears to be effortless and direction that can only be described as flawless.



Alex Jennings in 'Light in the Piazza'

Photo credit: Liz Lauren for Scenario Two

Brigitte Reiffenstuel's costumes are spectacular, particularly those that were designed for the women. Notable are Clara's crisp floral-patterned cocktail dresses and the billowing pink chiffon gown that she wears to announce her engagement. Margaret always looks like the sophisticated and polished lady that she is, dressed in various smart and precisely tailored ensembles complete with ankle-strapped fine leather pumps, hats adorned with feathers or intricate lace, clutching an expensive handbag in her immaculately gloved hands. The narrative unfolds and all of the magic comes to life upon Robert Jones' opera-worthy, single-unit set which is lit by Mark Henderson's radiant lighting design.

There's no doubt that Renée Fleming is the emotional center of this production and she is clearly a national treasure. Because of her ongoing relationship with Lyric it feels as if she is one of Chicago's very own. The love and admiration that the audience gave her on opening night was palpable and the adulation was shared when she took the stage for her deserved ovation at the curtain call. Who knows when she'll return to perform here again so it would be an absolute shame to miss this opportunity to see her, and this fabulous production, before year's end. This "Light" truly shines.

Theater Review by: **Jeffrey Leibham**

Published by: **Patrick McDonald**, Editor, HollywoodChicago.com

The Lyric Opera of Chicago presents "Light in the Piazza" in both evening (Thursday-Saturday, 7pm) and matinee (Sunday, 1:30pm) performances through December 29th, 2019, at the Opera House, 20 North Wacker Drive, Chicago. Featuring Renee Fleming, Solea Pfeiffer, Rob Houchen, Alex Jennings, Marie McLaughlin, Eric Sciotto and Suzanne Kantorski. Book by Craig Lucas. Music and Lyrics by Adam Guettel. Directed by Daniel Evans. For more information about the Lyric Opera of Chicago, [click here](#). [18]

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