

‘Daddy Long Legs’ turns oft-told 1912 story into a musical pas-de-deux

By Eric Marchese

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How many times has the 1912 novel “Daddy-Long-Legs” been adapted for the stage and screen? Let us count the ways.

Or, better still, let’s not. Suffice it to say that Jean Webster’s story has found its way into playhouses, movie theaters and on television numerous times and in various guises.

One of the most recent is a two-person musical play created right here in Southern California in 2009, by John Caird (book) and Paul Gordon (music and lyrics).

Since its premiere at Rubicon Theatre Company in Ventura, that version of “Daddy Long Legs” has played in London (2012) and off-Broadway (2015). Now it’s right back here at home with a new regional production by International City Theatre.

ICT’s staging will give local audiences a chance to get to know and focus on the two main characters of Webster’s story: Jerusha Abbott, an orphaned teen whose mysterious benefactor pays for her college education, and the benefactor, millionaire philanthropist Jervis Pendleton, whom Jerusha knows only as “Daddy Long Legs.”

Jervis’ interest in Jerusha first arises when he notices her skill and potential as a writer. Aside from not revealing his identity to her, Jervis places just one condition on his phi-

DADDY LONG LEGS

When: Opens tonight and runs through March 11. 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays

Where: Beverly O’Neil Theater, Long Beach Performing Arts Center, 330 East Seaside Way, Long Beach

Tickets: \$47-\$49

Information: 562-436-4610, InternationalCityTheatre.com

lanthropy: Once a month, Jerusha must write him a letter detailing her experiences now that she’s free of the orphanage and attending a prestigious college.

Those letters form the core of “Daddy Long Legs” and are the only contact between the two characters until the middle of the play.

Mary Jo DuPrey, ICT’s director, said this adaptation “is really close to the novel” in that way. “There are very few scenes where they actually speak to each other.”

The trick to staging it, DuPrey said, “is in keeping it fluid, like you’re watching scenes between them (even though) you’re not. I think we’ve risen to the occasion — the actors aren’t reading (the script) as if it’s in letters.”

DuPrey said that “because it’s set in 1912, the quality of language is elevated. Jerusha is becoming a writer, so the play contains

a lot about her turn of phrase and her wit. Also, she’s an orphan, so it has elements of her feeling out of place in the world — she feels she doesn’t belong at Vassar.”

The play, DuPrey said, rides along two equally potent rails: Caird’s text and Gordon’s music. “The letters are what the characters are saying, but the music is what they’re feeling.”

The music, she said, “elevates the play, changes it. It’s poetic, lyrical and sensitive,” and it conveys “the development of Jerusha’s and Jervis’ romance and his guilt of hiding (behind his anonymity). It’s a complex emotional journey beneath the letters, and the music carries that.”

DuPrey cited the play’s two key aspects: “One is the importance of educating women and the growth of Jerusha’s mind and intellect.”

The other element is “the romance that is spurred between the meeting of their minds and hearts.”

As befits the story, subject and characters, ICT’s staging uses just guitar, cello and piano to create the music — “like a chamber piece,” DuPrey said, “not overkill.”

The show’s musical director, Bill Wolfe, is its pianist and conductor, with Daniel Smith on cello and Blake Baldwin on guitar.

“The music is just gorgeous, and the story is told beautifully through it,” Wolfe said.



PHOTO BY TRACEY ROMAN

Nearly all of the communication between Jerusha Abbott (Ashley Ruth Jones) and Jervis Pendleton (Dino Nicandros) is in the form of the monthly letters she writes to him detailing her newfound experiences as a student.