

The West Side Waltz Plays the Right Notes

Reviewed by Annemarie Donkin

Will Geer's Theatricum Botanicum presents a spirited revival of *The West Side Waltz* by Academy Award-winning writer Ernest Thompson (*On Golden Pond*). The play focuses on Margaret Mary Elderdice, an elderly former concert pianist (masterfully portrayed by Ellen Geer, the Theatricum's artistic director. Strong and proud, Margaret Mary lives in a vast, yet dingy Upper West Side apartment and adamantly refuses to accept help from anyone. While her apartment may be threadbare, her mind is sharp as ever and she never misses an opportunity to dispense life wisdom to anyone who will listen.

Her great passion, however, is playing waltzes with her doting, violin-playing neighbor, Cara Varnum (in a beautiful performance by Melora Marshall).

Yet, with her health now in serious decline, Margaret Mary faces reality and engages a young woman from Brooklyn as a live-in companion. As the gum-snapping, would-be actress Robin Bird, Willow Geer delivers a humorous and affecting performance which sets up the tumultuous scenes in Act II.

Rounding out the ensemble is Miguel Pérez, in a commanding performance as Serge, the building's good-natured super. Charles Lin is



Left: *All in the family*: Ellen Geer as Margaret Mary Elderdice takes center stage with her real-life daughter, Willow Geer as the live-in companion, Robin Bird (left), to the aging Margaret Mary, and her real-life sister, Melora Marshall (right), who plays her neighbor Cara Varnum, whose violin can't quite get the notes right.

Below left: Ellen Geer as Margaret Mary Elderdice and Melora Marshall as her doting neighbor Cara Varnum strike up a waltz.

Below: Miguel Perez is perfection as the overburdened apartment super, Sergio.



PHOTOS BY IAN FLANDERS

perfectly cast as Glen, a brash young attorney with eyes for Robin.

The Theatricum's Adaptation
"When Ellen approached me about a production at Theatricum, I re-

read the play, which I hadn't looked at since we made the movie," says Thompson. "It's been a gift and a privilege to go back in and dig deeper into the relationships among these three women, to investigate them anew and give the play more gravitas than it had before. The play gets done all over the world, but not as much in the U.S., partly because of the difficulty that 'playing the music' places on the performers. But I also think that perhaps it's because I never really finished the play and now I've had a chance to finish it."

Considering the main theme of the play and the age of the audience, Act I could have been severely cut by the director, who allowed the actors to wander the stage instead of tightening scenes to focus on the material.

Granted, while some of the humor comes from Cara's inability to carry a tune, it was not integral to the plot. Perhaps a more realistic approach would be if the music had been played offstage or use a record player as the source of the waltzes, instead of the actors pretending to play onstage, which was somewhat distracting.

Not unexpected, the performances were outstanding and the play is heartwarming; seeing the great Ellen Geer onstage is absolutely the best reason to see this production!

Waltzing on Broadway

Thompson's stage play of "Waltz," starred Katharine Hepburn, Dorothy Loudon and Regina Bass. It ran at the Ahmanson Theater in January 1981 and toured to sold-out houses across the country. The play went on to Broadway ten months later, opening on Nov. 19, 1981 at

the Ethel Barrymore Theatre for 126 performances where Hepburn was nominated for a Tony. The 1995 film adaptation starred Shirley MacLaine, Liza Minnelli and Jennifer Grey.

Directed by Mary Jo DuPrey *The West Side Waltz*, runs June 25 through Oct. 1 at the company's beautiful outdoor venue under the oaks in Topanga as part of the 2022 Summer Repertory Season sponsored by the S. Mark Taper Foundation.

The creative team includes lighting designer Zach Moore; set designer/prop master John Eslick and costume designer Beth Eslick.

Music compilation and sound design are by Marshall McDaniel. Karen Osborne is the production stage manager, assisted by JP Pollinger.

Tickets range from \$10-\$42. Premium seating is available for \$60. Children 4 and under are free. There will be one Pay-What-You-Will performance (cash only at the door) on Friday, July 29 at 7:30 p.m.

Bring a Blanket!

The outdoor amphitheaters at Will Geer's Theatricum Botanicum are terraced into the hillside of the rustic canyon. Audience members are advised to dress casually (warmly for evenings) and bring cushions for bench seating or rent them for \$2. The theater is located at 1419 North Topanga Canyon Blvd. in Topanga.

Patrons are welcome to arrive early and picnic before a performance. Check the Theatricum website prior to each performance for current, up-to-date Covid-19 safety protocols.

For a complete schedule of performances and to purchase tickets, call (310) 455-3723 or visit theatricum.com.



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