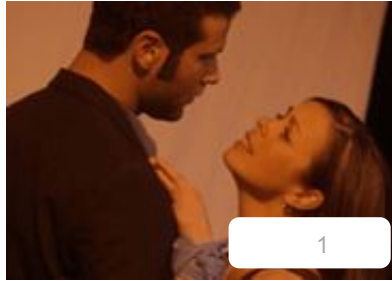


A SHORE BET

BY JULIET WITTMAN

THURSDAY, MARCH 9, 2006 | 10 YEARS AGO



Jeremy Make and Shelly Gaza discover life's a beach in *Sailor's Song*.

Imagine you're at an unnamed beach, surrounded by sand, salt-laden air and the sound of the sea rolling endlessly in and out, everything around you in muted shades of beige, silver and blue. By the weathered boardwalk, you meet two enchanting sisters. Lucy, a banker, is balanced, grounded, logical and very human. The other sister, Joan, has something ethereal about her. She calls herself a medium and lends her hand to a long-dead Punjabi, scribbling automatically -- even while carrying on a conversation with you -- as the Punjabi dictates to her the story of his oddly uneventful life. There's also a black guy named Jeff whom you never see, but whom Joan meets whenever it's raining, joining her strength to his in an effort to keep the Devil from possessing him. She's part angel, part updated version of those screwball 1930s movie heroines.

Directly across from the bar where you chat and drink with these sisters, unable to decide which one to love, is the battered porch where your uncle sits, waiting for your aunt inside the house to die. His deathwatch, her long dying process, throw into high relief all of the questions posed by your confusing life and by the sisters, in the same way that shadows brighten light and the shade of surrounding trees turns a patch of grass a luminescent green.

This is all a dream, or a memory mixed with dreams -- as Rich, the searcher-protagonist whose yearnings animate John Patrick Shanley's *Sailor's Song*, tells the audience at the very beginning. The action is light as helium, dizzy as the Viennese waltzes to which the characters periodically dance, delicious as a peach soufflé, and a constant tease at the border separating reality and fantasy. But there's a serious core to the work that asks how to live with integrity, what it means to make choices and -- given the inevitability of death -- just what an individual life adds up to. Uncle John drinks brandy, tosses out profanities, chuckles lewdly about sex and urges his nephew to throw aside his Hamlet-like indecision in order to screw, love and live. The women soothe and torment Rich. And Aunt Carla, whose terminal coma we have so far witnessed only through the eyes of her husband -- who speculates that within the carapace of her failing body

she "does her work" -- suddenly adds her own explosive moment of vision to the mix.

The sisters are symbolic, of course, two sides of one ideal woman; almost everyone looking for love is at some point torn between romance and realism. But Lucy and Joan are decidedly individual beings, too. Joan lives in the moment, gentle, loving and perennially willing to lend her mystical energies to anyone she perceives as needing them. In a sense, she becomes a scribe for Rich just as she is for the Punjabi, a translucent being through whom he can channel and clarify his own thoughts and feelings. Lucy, who thinks Joan is quite mad but loves her dearly nonetheless, is another story. She has a mind of her own; she's unwilling to be merely someone else's dream girl, and she challenges both playwright Shanley and Rich to let her break through the scrim of fantasy and show herself as she is: flawed, vulnerable, human and longing for love.

At the end, Joan attempts to harness her powers and summon the dead Aunt Carla into her own body on Uncle John's behalf. She fails. And she also succeeds.

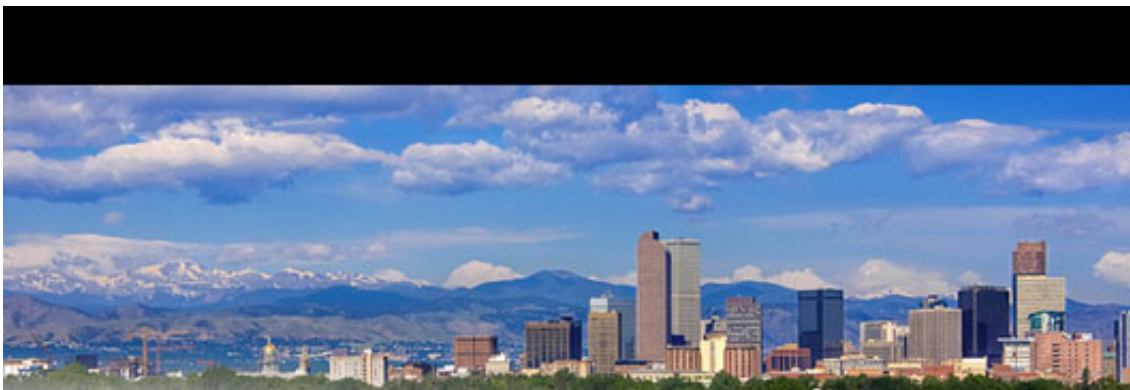
There's something both aching and sweet about this play -- at one point Rich observes, "Life hurts. Like sugar" -- and Paragon Theatre Company comes very close to entirely pulling it off. Tom Borrillo is very good as the earthy John, masking his grief -- the long-drawn-out days of Carla's dying, the boredom and irritation that alternate with sorrow -- with a bluff, matter-of-fact manner. Shelly Gaza is a sweetly delightful Lucy, and Kate Avallone gives misty Joan a deep gravity and peacefulness. Jeremy Make's Rich has a gently bewildered quality and a disarming way of responding to those around him, although I'd like to see a little more vigor. Melissa McCorkle, who plays Carla, is a terrific dancer. But still, some element is missing from this production.

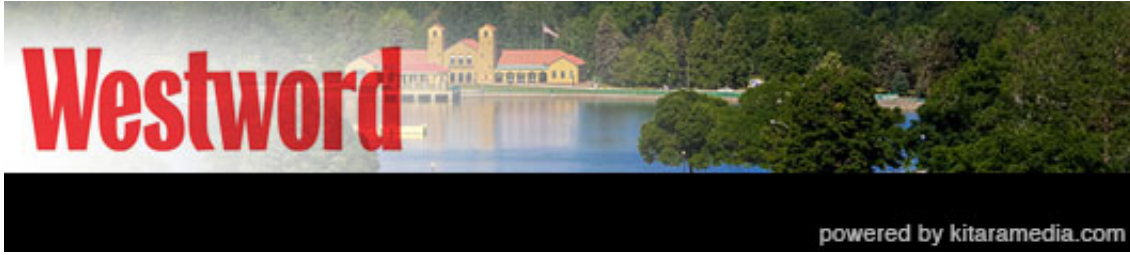
A playing area can betray a director or playwright, and this one is difficult. Despite David Lafont's evocative seaside set, the long, shallow stage at the Phoenix Theatre is better suited to an animated cartoon strip than a play of depth and mystery. This makes the dancing problematic: The actors are so close to the audience that you can see every bobble and hesitation. Gaza and Vallone are graceful waltzers, but *Sailor's Song* begs for the elegance of Rogers and Astaire.

Still, under Wendy Franz's direction, the magic remains. Reality and unreality wind in and out of each other until all that's left is human love.

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