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Comedy A Rich Blend of Romance, Satire

By AMANDA HENRY
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TAMPA - Most of what passes for "romantic comedy" these days is not unlike watching a person of limited intelligence cut out paper dolls with child safety scissors, then smash them together while making kissy noises.

So when a story about two people falling in love is told with sparkle and wit -- as in Jobsite Theater's "The March of the Kitefliers," now playing at the Tampa Bay Performing Arts Center -- it's time to break out the party hats and celebrate. "Kitefliers," an original work by local writers Shawn Paonessa and Neil Gobioff, isn't a flawless play, but it is charming and fresh and -- wonder of wonders -- genuinely funny.

The story mines some of the same territory as the movie "Reality Bites," only with an updated soundtrack and more whimsy. Sam (played by co-writer Paonessa) is a jaded thirtysomething with an artistic bent who left his corporate marketing job and now manages a corporate coffee shop. His best friend, Jack (David Jenkins), the poster child for arrested development, is always around to egg on Sam's juvenile tendencies, at least until Julia (Meg Heimstead) walks into the shop and turns Sam's head with her knowledge of the Coen brothers and art history.

"Kitefliers" doesn't get bogged down in the "meet cute" convention (They both want to buy the same pair of cashmere gloves! She's planning his wedding! He has a terminal illness!). Julia just comes into the shop because she's a friend of Rita (the scene-stealing Summer Bohnenkamp-Jenkins), who works with Sam.

What we get instead are several delightful fantasy sequences in which Sam imagines meeting Julia, asking her out and so on. Some work better than others in terms of choreography and timing at oddslot, but any one of a handful of these cleverly written interludes would be enough to justify the price of admission.

In addition to sending up the goofiness of human courtship rituals, "Kitefliers" finds time to skewer the coffee industry, poetry readings and smarmy corporate dorks. Wide-as-a-barn targets, it's true, but the digs are well-aimed and timely. (Judging by the sighs of recognition on opening weekend, way too many of you have either done time in the barista trenches or taken out a second mortgage to feed your frothy beverage habit.)

Later on, things get complicated, as they must. At least the issues between Sam and Julia -- his maturity, her need for control -- are more credible than the usual fiance/coma/armageddon gambit. Harder to swallow is the (gulp) dream ballet sequence, which has some nice metaphors but plays a bit too sincere, in a self-help kind of way; likewise, a few of the romantic scenes get a bit twee.

But the rough spots are easy to overlook in this otherwise polished piece, with its affable leads and screwball tendencies (amplified by Kari Keller's direction).

There are borrowed bits in "Kitefliers" -- this is a referential generation -- but there are also

moments of real inspiration. Besides, it's what you might call an uber grande good time.

THEATER REVIEW

The March of the Kitefliers

WHEN: Through Aug. 21; 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday; 4 p.m. Sunday

WHERE: Shimberg Playhouse, Tampa Bay Performing Arts Center, 1010 N. MacInnes Place, Tampa

TICKETS: \$16.50; (813) 229-7827

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