

# 'Lake's End' a wondrous romantic tragedy



Henny Russell, Jason Butler Harner

By Bob Goepfert

The Record

LAKE GEORGE — Adirondack Theatre Festival is creating magic with its opening production, "The Lake's End." Not only does the play transport you to another time and place, the makeshift theater space at the Lake George Recreation actually has you believing you are on Italy's Lake Como in 1937.

Indeed, the spot works so perfectly and is so pretty that ATF might find their audiences demanding at least one outdoor show a summer.

The venue is worth experiencing, and so is the play.

This is the world-premiere of "The Lake's End," and like so many first-time offerings there are improvements that can be made in the material.

However, this is not a weak play in need of improvements. It is a good play that can be made even better.

At its heart, "Lake's End" is a love story about people who have difficulty expressing their love. It's not because the people are inarticulate. This is an intelligent group upon whom playwright Anton Dudley bestows the gift of poetic language that is beautiful without being pretentious.

What makes this love story so attractive is that the character's search is not to find someone who loves them. Their drive is to find someone on whom they can bestow their love. The tragedy in the play comes when that person is found in the wrong place at the worst possible time.

The play revolves about two brothers. Paolo is emotionally afraid of commitment and the younger brother, Fini, is a gay man who must exist in the emerging Fascist world of Europe.

It's almost ironic that the gay Fini is so enamored by life that he cannot resist demonstrating

a love that is dangerous to be displayed in public. Paolo is so inhibited that he cannot even offer a compliment to a woman who cares deeply about him.

The brothers were born in the Italian village of Lake Como. When they were infants, their mother mysteriously sent them to England and put them up for adoption. They now return to their birth home as British citizens. They are staying at a resort hotel while determining what to do with their mother's estate.

While there, the staid Paolo forms a friendship with Marie, a freelance cartographer who is wandering Europe drawing maps and selling them to tourists. The flamboyant Fini forms a sincere, loving relationship with the young Italian waiter Alberto.

The first act is enchanting as the relationships are explored. Through this interaction we discover that Fini is a carefree, child-like nature man who has a zest for life and a love of people. We also learn that Paolo is a cranky man who drinks to excess.

Fini is a sensualist who falls in love with beauty and life on a daily basis. He seldom thinks of little more than having joy or bringing it to others.

Paul is a realist who wants protection from the realities of the world. He finds it in the bottle and by avoiding personal relationships. He appears uncaring and cold, but he cares for his brother and knows his trusting innocence will bring him harm by a society about to go mad.

The performances are uniformly excellent. Jason Butler Harner creates a Fini who is flamboyantly attractive. He signals the man's charm and makes us understand why people love and want to protect him, yet he pushes his energy to the limit so we also realize how he

can become wearisome. It's a nice balancing act that offers a look a real human being whose greatest fault is being too much in love with everything.

Martin Kildare is almost too handsome and virile for us to believe that Paolo has an old soul. However, Kildare makes clear the man's personal tragedy without resorting to overwrought behavior. Paolo is able to be dislikable without us disliking the character.

Henny Russell is a breath of fresh air as the European woman who loves both brothers. She is searching for something from life, but though she creates guides for others, she is without one for her own life.

Russell finds the vagueness in the woman's psyche without making her appear weak. Her attraction for Paolo is never validated by reason, but thanks to Russell's work, it seems right.

Anthony Veneziale offers a nicely understated performance

as Alberto, the young man who loves Fini, but is uncertain about how to proceed with the relationship. Even though the play takes place in his country, he is the outsider. He is a waiter and they are upper-class guests. Even Alberto socializes with the others, except for Fini, he knows he does not belong with them any more than they belong at Lake Como.

Then Bruno enters their lives. He is an Italian nationalist while Alberto is a humanist, and the conflict between them is inevitable, as is the fate of the innocents. Played by Robert Gomes, Bruno alternates between charming and violent and serves as the catalyst for tragedy.

The first act is engrossing, but the play meanders in act two. As it turns darker, it takes too long to reach its almost pre-ordained finale. Part of the problem is the incompleteness of the Italian characters.

Alberto could be an almost a parallel figure to Paolo, as his

fears force him to withdraw and hide his affection for Fini. His reasons are clear, but it would be richer to hear him express his frustrations about his lack of power. I also feel Bruno could be written as more than a volatile reactionary.

These are small quarrels about a work that is otherwise caring, engaging and a pleasure to experience.

Martha Banta, a master of making unusual spaces enrich an experience, directs the work with intelligence and sensitivity.

The spot overlooking the lake is gorgeous, but the play's final powerful scene is the visual equal of the natural setting.

The moment also provides a memorable, emotional climax to a well-written, thoughtful play.

"The Lake's End," Adirondack Theatre Festival at the Lake George Recreation Center, Northway exit 21, Lake George. Performances 8 p.m. tonight through Saturday. Tickets \$22-\$17. 793-7474