

First Love

A romance between two old-time NYC Leftists in their 60's begins on a park bench in this 2002 whimsical play by Charles Mee with Magritte motifs.

Posted on June 16, 2018 by Darryl Reilly in [Off-Broadway](#), [Plays](#), [Still Open](#)

A woman in her 60's badgering a man in his 60's sleeping on a park bench is the premise of playwright Charles Mee's *First Love*. Depending on one's taste it could either be enchanting or 75-minutes of strained whimsy.

"This is the world of Magritte," and indeed it is. The play opens with a young woman silently appearing and wearing a flowing white gown, a derby with a flower and a pipe. This takes place on scenic designer Edward Pierce's gorgeous oval-shaped surrealist-themed set with sky blue walls, clouds, green grass and a large painted tree. There's also a door, shutters and off to the sides are a piano and a microphone. All of these elements cleverly assist in fulfilling the stage direction of "We are indoors and out at the same time." For a barbecue, a grill is wheeled out with a sign in French that says, "This is a barbeque."

Eventually Harold enters and goes to sleep on a green bench. Edith enters and pesters him to wake up so she can sit down. They converse, there are sparks as they share their lives, go back to her basement apartment, sing songs and have sex. The young woman continually appears in various guises that include a waitress wearing a black and white striped shirt and a beret at a café holding a picture of a piece of pie. Will Edith and Harold find happiness together?

Mr. Mee was born in Illinois in 1938, graduated from Harvard and begin his award-winning theatrical career in 1960's Greenwich Village. He is primarily

known for non-traditional plays that are usually derived from existing literary sources.

First Love appears to be a nostalgic ode to his early years as the two main characters are old-time New York City Leftists. Jack Kerouac, Lenny Bruce and Allen Ginsburg are among the icons of the past that are extolled. The Paris student riots of 1968 are commented on and Communism is lauded. There's scant biographical information about the couple though traumatic events are briefly imparted. The dialogue is heightened, poetic and with Beckettian reveries. Though the play is not very compelling, its good-natured spirit sustains it.

Angelina Fiordellisi delightfully plays Edith and the role is a grand showcase for her appealing talents. The white-haired and animated Ms. Fiordellisi offers a radiant portrait of aged vitality. Beautifully singing "Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered," joyously dancing and exhibiting spry sensuality, she is captivating. She also is heartbreaking delivering a speech about her first love.

Michael O'Keefe's Harold is an engaging personification of despair and resilience. With the sketchy personal information that is given, Mr. O'Keefe still manages to create a rich characterization with his distinctive vocal delivery and his weathered handsomeness. Traces of his youthful good looks first displayed in his breakthrough parts in the films *The Great Santini* and *Caddyshack* remain.

Sprightly Taylor Harvey's recurring turns as The Young Woman are pleasant intrusions into the events due to her vivacious presence.

Director Kim Weild crisp direction has the action flowing smoothly. Ms. Weild crucially conveys (as in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*) the sense of more time passing than we're actually seeing. Weild also finely balances the tones of absurdism, fantasy and romance.

Paul Miller's lively lighting design wonderfully captures the stylized dimension. Sound designer Christian Frederickson's efforts beautifully render the musical snippets that range from Satie to disco and the characters singing.

Edith's ensembles of a peasant skirt, a purple dress and flamboyant accessories are brightly realized by costume designer Theresa Squire. Ms. Squire's colorful creations for *The Young Woman* are quite arresting and Harold's outdoor gear is appropriate.

First Love premiered in 2001 at New York Theatre Workshop and was performed the next year at The Magic Theatre in San Francisco. This revival proves it to be a minor though charming work and it is an opportunity to experience Charles Mee's sensibility.

First Love (through July 8, 2018)

Cherry Lane Theatre, 38 Commerce Street, in Manhattan

For tickets, call 866-811-4111 or visit <http://www.cherrylanetheatre.org>

Running time: 80 minutes with no intermission