

REVIEWS

The Thrill of *First Love*

Two sixtysomethings fall for each other in this Charles Mee revival at the Cherry Lane Theatre.

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Taylor Harvey, Angelina Fiordellisi, and Michael O'Keefe in Charles Mee's *First Love* at the Cherry Lane Theatre. (© Monique Carboni)

Time flies, and it only flies faster when you get older. That feeling, the ephemeral nature of all of our important moments, is on display in Charles Mee's *First Love*, a 2001 play now being revived at the Cherry Lane Theatre. Mee is holding a mirror close up to a particular kind of reality — even if the play is as fanciful as a painting by Magritte.

In this romantic comedy, which premiered at New York Theatre Workshop just two days before 9/11, Mee introduces us to Edith (Angelina Fiordellisi) and Harold (Michael O'Keefe), a pair of sixtysomethings who meet in a New York City park. Edith is a bon vivant, the kind of downtown bohemian actor who fondly remembers watching playwright Joe Chaikin throw an ice cream in critic John Simon's face at the Theatre de Lys on Christopher Street. Harold is similarly cultured, with fond reminiscences of Fritz Reiner conducting the symphony at Ravinia, and he also possesses a sad family history. They're both ardently political leftists.

Over the course of the play's 80 minutes, Mee shows us Edith and Harold's relationship in fast-forward. Suddenly, they're at her apartment having a barbecue, next thing we know, they're doing a sexy striptease for each other before sleeping together for the first time. Their first fight, almost immediately following, leads to a crossroads that neither of them can bear.

Directed by Mee's longtime collaborator Kim Weild, *First Love* is a tricky play. Negatively received on its first New York go-round nearly 17 years ago, it's unapologetically idiosyncratic. Edith and Harold spontaneously burst into song ("I Love You for Sentimental Reasons" segues into "Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered" into "September Song"). A mysterious young woman (Taylor Harvey) slinks her way through the scenes, assisting in delivering props and changing scenes.

Weild, who marks her sixth Mee play with *First Love*, is completely in tune with Mee's collage-like style, and has guided her designers the same way. Edward Pierce's pastoral set of blue clouds and extra bright green grass, combined with Theresa Squire's boho chic costumes, and Paul Miller's lighting, resemble the surrealist paintings of René Magritte.

First Love is not for everyone, but Fiordellisi and O'Keefe make for a thoroughly charming pair as these two unlikely lovers. Neither one hit a single false note, even as Mee's writing becomes overly florid. "What

difference would it make whether I was a professor or a shopkeeper as long as somehow I had a time sitting by a lake in the late afternoon watching the light soften and change," Edith says in one of many monologues that are so purple we lose track of what they're trying to say. But thanks to their warm, gentle work together, we understand it all and root for this first love to take hold.