

'Appoggiatura' is a wild but enjoyable journey

By A.H. Goldstein For the Camera

Updated: 02/06/2015 08:10:19 AM MST

DailyCamera.com

If you go

3 stars

What: Denver Center Theatre Company's "Appoggiatura"

When: 6:30 p.m. Tuesdays-Thursdays, 7:30 p.m. Fridays, 1:30 and 7:30 p.m. Saturdays, 1:30 p.m. Sundays, through Feb. 22

Where: Ricketson Theatre at the Denver Center for the Performing Arts, 950 13th St., Denver

Tickets: \$41-\$58

Info: 303-893-4100 or denvercenter.org

Parents' guide: Some language and content might be inappropriate for pre-teens

There's nothing more disorienting than international travel.

Between the jet lag, the culture shock and the language barriers, carting off to another country can serve as the gateway for confusion, discomfort and, if you're lucky, self-discovery.

Playwright James Still uses all of the potential of a foreign odyssey to his dramatic advantage in "Appoggiatura," a world premiere currently running at the Ricketson Theatre at the Denver Center for the Performing Arts Complex.

The Denver Center Theatre Company commissioned a full production of the work after its initial reading at the 2014 Colorado New Play Summit, and the current production, directed by Risa Brainin, pops with the élan of a bold experiment. With its fluid format, its varied characters and its successful use of multimedia components, the show offers some very real and very affecting creative risks.

Those bold moves don't always work in the course of this careful study of the lasting impact of grief and loss on three different protagonists. The show defies traditional definitions of tragedy and comedy; the playwright takes liberties with chronology and time, and at its weakest moments, the effect is more disjointed than brilliant. Still, the success rate is high enough to make the show a worthwhile gem, a bold new work that's worth making a trip to see.

"Appoggiatura" is set in the city of Venice, and the core cast of characters are all foreigners taking in the culture and the sheer foreign quality of the city. The effect becomes a powerful tool for the playwright. Indeed, the ancient Italian city becomes a catalyst for the characters' emotional growth and development during the show; its canals, its landmarks, its songs and history loom as one of the show's central players.

The show opens as three Americans laze in a Venice hotel, awaiting a solution to lost luggage and mixed-up reservations. Aunt Chuck (Rob Nagle), Helen (Darrie Lawrence) and Sylvie (Lenne Klingaman)

are American travelers abroad, family members with ties that aren't precisely traditional. They're all grieving for the same man: Gordon. He was a husband to both Helen and Chuck, and he was a role model for Sylvie, a twenty-something who has helped finalize Chuck's title of "Aunt."

The three respond to the recent death of Gordon in different ways. Chuck remains mired in sadness, his response flipping between frustration and tears. Helen takes the loss as a spur for growth, while Sylvie wrestles with the fallout in her own personal relationships. All three have come to Venice in hopes of some kind of evolution, some type of personal growth.

Their own personalized transformations come thanks to the quirky spirit of Venice itself, the legacy of painters, poets and composers. Between the affecting atmosphere of the ancient city and the kind guidance of "travel guider" and native Marco (Nick Mills), the three begin a journey that often is disorienting. Time becomes fluid. Time warps back on itself. The ghost of Gordon suddenly becomes a much more definite presence than a mere memory, and Helen finds vibrant traces of her former self. Through it all, three Venetian street musicians (Julian Remulla, Paul Bentzen and Mehry Eslaminia) offer a soundtrack of violin lines, mandolin melodies and passionate vocals.

The unmoored trip through time flows beautifully thanks to the carefully crafted production. As the narration relies on past memories and past incarnations of the characters, the actors juggle different duties beautifully. Mills flips between his duties as Marco and a young iteration of Gordon; Klingaman is seamless in her transition from Sylvie to a young version of Helen. Lawrence and Nagle take their own turns making rapid transitions. Remulla, Bentzen and Eslaminia are also chameleons, taking breaks from musical duties to play Venetian denizens and other side characters.

This ensemble, along with brilliant stage design, costume work and projection elements, makes the more slippery parts of the plot approachable. They bring meaning to the title of "Appoggiatura," an Italian musical term that refers to the way the dissonance caused by unresolved notes can give a larger composition its beauty. It's an apt description for this sometimes puzzling, sometimes profound play.