

'Appoggiatura' Hits All The Right Notes In Denver

[Maureen Lee Lenker](#) | January 28, 2015 | 7:45 p.m. PST
Staff Reporter



Julian Remulla plays the violin (Photo by Jennifer M. Koskinen)

Shakespeare had a thing for Italy – the sunny climes, the passionate people, and the stunning backdrops – from Verona to Venice, he made frequent use of the Mediterranean country as he examined life, love, loss, justice, and what it means to be human.

It is fitting then, that "Appoggiatura," making its world premiere at the Denver Center for the Performing Arts, and set in Venice, should be so Shakespearean in nature. It frequently references the Bard with snatches of Shakespearean quotes sprinkled throughout to underscore themes and make witty reference to its Venetian setting. And like the best of Shakespeare's comedies, it blends moments of humor and pathos with coincidental, almost magical, circumstances to create an emotional meditation on love and loss.

The play, written by three-time Pulitzer nominee James Still, follows three Americans in Venice, traveling together in the wake of the recent death of a loved one. In Venice, they examine their past and their futures, as they strive to heal and make peace with their past loves and losses. The play combines a charming sense of humor with a sparkling magical realism and quiet, profound moments of grief and memory.

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It is an emotionally resonant work that weaves an almost imperceptible spell over its audience through the delicacy of many of its moments: Sylvie (Lenne Klingaman) and Italian tour guide Marco (Nick Mills) discuss the intricacies of heartbreak; Aunt Chuck (Rob Nagle) falls into the reverie of his memories, imagining himself back with his partner; Helen (Darrie Lawrence) chats about Venice and her deceased husband with her younger self (Lenne Klingaman). The writing and the exquisite work of the strong cast shine in these quieter moments, where characters reflect on their sense of loss, searching for a way forward.

Where the play falters is when it attempts to shoehorn larger tragedies or metaphor into the personal grief of its characters. The title "Appoggiatura" is explained in the program, but Still also felt it necessary to include a scene explaining the word in depth, hitting us over the head with the metaphorical link between this music note and the characters' journeys.

Sylvie (Lenne Klingaman) has not only just lost her grandfather to Alzheimer's but also lost her father on 9/11. The addition of this tragedy feels like an attempted shortcut, a means to generate more emotion in audience members when reminded of this horrific event and thus deepen our connection to the characters' own sense of loss. But the writing is so superb throughout and so beautifully realized by the actors, that this seems unnecessary – we don't need shorthand to connect us to these characters and the tragedies of their lives. We feel their grief keenly through the nuanced performances. When the writing and performances are given space to breathe and Still trusts in the emotion of his characters' most intimate moments and personal tragedies, the play soars.



Helen (Darrie Lawrence) chats with her younger self (Lenne Klingaman) in a surreal moment in Venice (Photo by Jennifer M. Koskinen)

The cast is small with many actors doubling or tripling up on roles, and they give believable and nuanced performances across the board. Julian Remulla, who excels on the violin as Vivaldi, Paul Bentzen, and Mehry Eslaminia play a trio of Venetian street musicians who provide music that is at turns funny, romantic, and tragic – giving a musically-titled play a strong core of musicians to drive it forward with scoring and interludes.

Despite its focus on grief and healing after the loss of a loved one, the play is remarkably humorous, aided particularly by the talents of Nick Mills as Marco and Rob Nagle as Aunt Chuck. The play is funny throughout with comedic moments coming from the entire cast, but Mills and Nagle center Act 1 and 2 respectively with their comedic turns that are grounded in reality.

Mills plays Marco, a handsome Italian who has talked Helen into using his skills as a “travel guider” over email despite his complete lack of experience in such matters. Much of the humor in the first half comes from his lost-in-translation antics, but he lends the proceedings such a good-natured charm that he never verges on caricature. Instead, he presents Marco as a nuanced, fully realized human being – charming, funny, lovelorn, but also attuned to the vagaries of loss, providing insight and humorous commentary to each of his three American tourists.



Sylvie (Lenne Klingaman) and Marco (Nick Mills) chat about love over coffee (Photo by Jennifer M. Koskinen)

As Aunt Chuck, Rob Nagle does something even more remarkable – he makes the complexities of grief – the anger, the laughter, the sadness, the bittersweet nature of memory – come vividly to life. Grief is a messy business and intrinsic to its nature are moments of humor – whether it is gallows humor as a coping mechanism or the actual hilarity of past memories with a loved one. Nagle brings a great deal of comedy and pathos to the production with his nuanced depiction of a grieving partner – especially in the second act, you find yourself laughing and crying along with him because the struggle he portrays is both intensely personal and exceedingly relatable. He packs a wallop with his performance and the poignance of his character’s emotional journey had me overcome in the final moments of the play.

The play has an effervescent, magical quality to it inherent to plot points involving the bending of time, and this quality is enhanced by the ethereal sets and lighting designed by David M. Barber and Charles R. Macleod. The grounded realism of the actors is deftly balanced by the setting --

a series of arches and balconies as backdrops that come to life as various Venetian locales through a splendid combination of lighting and projections. With some deft lighting, projection, and movement from the actors, you easily believe that they are gliding down a Venetian canal in a gondola.

The play connects back to its Shakespearean roots most profoundly in its use of magical realism and its suggestion that the slight bending of time might bring some solace to these individuals as they interact with younger versions of themselves and the man they lost. Lost or presumed dead loved ones are a common plot device in Shakespeare – from Sebastian’s reappearance in “Twelfth Night” to Hermione’s reawakening in “The Winter’s Tale.” “Appoggiatura” trades heavily on this convention without fully committing to a return from the dead—it operates instead on the power of memory and the suggestion of a bending of time for the sake of healing.

It allows the characters to fulfill a desire to interact with one’s younger self or lost love for the purpose of reflection, closure, or just one last moment with that person. It hints at a Shakespearean conclusion, a la the rebirth of Hero in “Much Ado,” while still allowing the characters the modern reality of finding their own bittersweet closure and solace in each other through their varied pasts.

Overall, the play is a beautiful reflection on love, loss, and the painstaking process of finding closure after grief. Anyone who finds themselves near the Denver Center for Performing Arts should pay a visit to see a refreshing, new work that features a cast bursting with talent. And who knows? As it’s the world premiere, perhaps you will find this gem of a play come to a venue near you sometime in the future. If you do, it’s worth the trip.

“Appoggiatura” is playing through February 22nd at the Denver Center for the Performing Arts in the Ricketson Theatre (Speer Blvd. and Arapahoe Street, Denver, CO). Tickets start at \$41. For more information, visit: www.DenverCenter.org

Contact Staff Reporter Maureen Lee Lenker [here](#) or follow her on twitter [@maureenlee89](https://twitter.com/maureenlee89)