

Review: *Appoggiatura* Sounds Great on Paper, But Hits Some Sour Notes on Stage

By Juliet Wittman

Published Wed., Feb. 4 2015 at 6:25 AM



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Mehry Eslaminia, Paul Bentzen and Julian Remulla.

Appoggiatura

Denver Center Theatre Company

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Appoggiatura, a musically titled play by two-time Pulitzer-nominee James Still, is receiving its world premiere at the Denver Center Theatre Company, where it was a favorite among the readings at last year's New Play Summit. I've been giving a lot of thought to the role of music in plays recently, particularly since seeing *Charles Ives Take Me Home* at Curious Theatre Company last month. I don't mean musicals; I mean the way regular playwrights use music: for mood and emphasis, of course, or to indicate time and place. But I've also noticed that the dialogue of playwrights clearly in

love with music is itself particularly musical, and has the most evocative rhythms.

There's an analogy to the way ballet dancers respond to music. Some can't keep tempo. Some carry a metronome in their heads. With others, you can actually sense the music flowing through their bodies. And then there are the sublime moments when dancer and music become one. In the Curious production, Ives and his work were integral to everything that happened; the action seemed breathed out by the music.

There are three musicians in *Appoggiatura*. They are all talented and lively, and they pop up periodically to provide comic or musical interludes. But rather than being integral to the play's movement or meaning, they feel like decoration. An appoggiatura is a kind of grace note -- usually dissonant -- that metaphorically leans toward the following note and helps resolve the melody. The three main characters in the play are in a semi-suspended state and leaning toward some kind of realization, resolution, epiphany. Playwright Still provides music and magic to help them along.

The play itself has an intriguing premise: Three people arrive in Venice, each absorbed in his or her own grief for the same man, who has recently died. Gordon was the husband of Helen (Darrie Lawrence); she mourns him with their granddaughter, Sylvie (Lenne Klingaman). She has also had the generosity to invite Aunt Chuck (Rob Nagle) -- the man for whom Gordon left her -- along on the trip, though it's never clear whether she's seeking rapprochement, understanding or mutual comfort from him; these motives are alluded to but don't get much play, in dialogue or action. Aunt Chuck spends a lot of time complaining, and he has plenty to complain about: the weather, the accommodations and, most important, his suitcase, lost in transit. When he cracks and reveals his grief, it's not to Helen, but to their tour guide, a charming and sincere trickster named Marco (Nick Mills) -- and even then we don't get much depth or specificity. Grandparent-grandchild relationships can be very deep, intense and complicated, but I've no idea about the shape and contour of Sylvie's with Gordon. Did he help her with spelling or piano? Share ice cream sundaes with her? Teach her jokes? For that matter, how did Helen and Gordon interact?



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Julian Remulia in *Appoggiatura*.

There isn't much action. Still seems to expect the wealth of symbols he tosses onto the stage to be sufficient to tell the story. Everything has meaning -- make that Meaning. Venice. The lost suitcase. The songs. Multiplying suitcases. An enigmatic old man. Vivaldi himself as a masked violinist. A repeated set of directions that inevitably lead to a character first losing his or her way and then -- on a metaphorical level -- finding it. There's also fantasy and magic realism, time collapsing in on itself, and a rather lovely flight of stone stairs that stretches from one reality to another.

The action does liven up a lot in the second act when, as Sylvie struggles with her (again vaguely defined) gay relationship, the past appears to both Aunt Chuck and Helen, who sees her own young self (Klingaman again) honeymooning with Gordon (Mills again) and is asked to take a photograph with their 1950s Brownie camera. In another fine scene, 1950s Helen confronts the wonders of the laptop and FaceTime. During these funny, alive moments, there's real talent and imagination at work.

The success of *Appoggiatura* ultimately relies on your finding the characters and their predicaments delightful, but -- whether because of the acting or the script -- they struck me as more fey than charming, with the notable exception of Mehry Eslaminia, who exudes such vibrant warmth as one of the musicians and, on video, Sylvie's absent lover that I wished these two roles were larger and more central. As it is, *Appoggiatura* is the kind of play that sounds much better described than when actually staged.

Appoggiatura, presented by the [Denver Center Theatre Company](http://denvercenter.org) through February 22. Ricketson Theatre, Denver Performing Arts Complex. For ticket information, call 303-893-4100 or go to denvercenter.org.