

Actors Bridge can't help but win with magical "Failure: A Love Story"

Amy Stumpfl, For The Tennessean 2:11 p.m. CDT October 30, 2016



(Photo: Kara McClelland)

As audience members settled into their seats Friday evening for Actors Bridge Ensemble's opening performance of "Failure: A Love Story," a character curiously called "Gramophone," offered a little advice: "Give us your ear, open your heart, and we'll carry you away."

And who could blame us for wanting to be carried away by such a fanciful tale?

Penned by Chicago playwright Philip Dawkins, this highly unconventional piece of theatre centers on the enchanting Fail sisters in 1928 – the year, we are told, that all three sisters will die. But while "Failure" deals honestly with love and loss, there's a quirky sense of joy that permeates the story.

Director Jessika Malone embraces that whimsical spirit, harnessing the considerable talents of "Failure's" cast and production team. Together, with Scenic Designer Mitch Massaro, Malone has envisioned a world in which gentle memories and harsh corporeal truths play out with equal grace.

Mallory Kimbrell's puppetry design adds to the magic – from a sad-eyed pooch to a devoted pair of parakeets. And Musical Director/Composer Kara McLeland (who plays Gramophone) contributes heartfelt melodies – some familiar, some original – that beautifully underscore the script's most tender moments.

The performances are just as satisfying. Amanda Grace Creech is lovely as Nelly, the first of the Fail Girls to die. Creech captures her character's starry-eyed innocence, but it's her earnest delivery that makes the golly-gee attitude all the more endearing.

Cassie Hamilton is positively fearless as Jenny June, a plucky gal who never shies away from a challenge. Watching Hamilton gamely "swim" across the stage is sheer delight.

And Brooke Gronemeyer lends a palpable sense of longing to the more reserved Gerty – the last of the sisters to go. Gerty may not be as flashy as her sisters, but Gronemeyer finds quiet moments to shine.

Tom Mason brings surprising depth to the devoted Mortimer Mortimer, a man "so successful, he's named after himself." Diego Gomez turns in a strong performance as the Fails' adopted brother, John N., who we learn is "better with animals than with people." And a nimble Chorus drifts in and out of the story, adding bits of narration, insight, and helping to maintain the story's almost dreamlike cadence.

With so much going on, it might be easy to get lost in a sea of well-worn metaphors. And to be fair, Dawkins' script – while potent and lyrical – does occasionally lose focus. But as with any tall tale, there's an emotional truth to "Failure" that can not be denied. And for those willing to open their hearts, the illusion is powerful.

Bringing together the best elements of storytelling, music and theatre, "Failure" marks another Nashville premiere – and a resounding win – for ABE.

If you go:

What: Actors Bridge Ensemble presents the Nashville premiere of "Failure: A Love Story"

When: Through November 5. Performances at 7 p.m., Thursdays-Saturdays; 4 p.m., Sundays.

Where: Darkhorse Theatre, 4610 Charlotte Ave., Nashville

Tickets: \$25 (\$30 at the door)

Contact: <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/failure-a-love-story-by-philip-dawkins-tickets-28131016628> (<https://www.eventbrite.com/e/failure-a-love-story-by-philip-dawkins-tickets-28131016628>)

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