

Review from *offoffonline.com*

Love Is All Around

by Doug Strassler
Barefoot in the Park reviewed July 16, 2009

Neil Simon remains one of the pre-eminent masters of modern American comedy. Few peers can match his penchant for hysterical character-driven dialogue and the way he can mine humor from even the most mundane of events. Ground Up Productions has revived one of Simon's earliest, most signature works at the Manhattan Theatre Source, and it is a production of which Simon can be proud.

That show would be *Barefoot in the Park*, about the yin-yang love match between cherubic Corrie Bratter (Kate Middleton) and her straight-laced lawyer husband, Paul (Guy Olivieri). After a whirlwind courtship, the two elope and move into a fifth-floor Manhattan walk-up. Apparently, the climb up to their apartment is quite a schlep, even by New York standards, as several servicemen and Corrie's mother, Mrs. Banks (Amelia White) attest.



Olivieri and Middleton make quite the couple.

Photo Credit:Randy Morrison



Middleton sets up White and Purcell.

Photo Credit:Randy Morrison

Director Lon Blumgarner lucks out in that the Source's performance space lends itself perfectly to the Bratter apartment's claustrophobic feel – the size of the stage is actually about as small as many starter apartments in the city. Blumgarner even goes one better than that by having several of the seats in the audience turn out to be furniture later delivered to the Bratters (not to worry, the seats are replaced by new chairs between the first and second act).

Barefoot looks at the different strokes between Corrie and Paul, which increasingly come to the surface as Corrie deigns to fix up her widowed mother with Victor Velasco (Eric Purcell), the intriguing upstairs neighbor. One of the great strengths of Simon's original play is that Corrie's and Paul's sides both have merit and are both flawed. Since they rushed into marriage heart over head, they have yet to navigate the tricky road of compromise.

Additionally, one of the great strengths of this Ground Up production is that its cast does

an impeccable job all around. First and foremost is Middleton, in what I can only hope is a star-making performance. The actress is outstanding, blending just the right amount of perky, petulant, vulnerable, and optimistic. It's hard not to take your eyes off of her, but to her credit, Middleton sharply cedes the stage as frequently as she commands it, particularly when playing off of Olivieri. He has a trickier part, since Paul is so much more reserved, but the actor masters subtle hints to clue the audience into exactly what his character thinks at all times.

The supporting cast of *Barefoot* also delivers the material perfectly. White has the show-stopping role, as anyone familiar with the show knows. It is indeed a textbook comedic performance, with one terrific line followed by another ("I feel like I died and went to Heaven...and had to climb my way up"), yet White makes even more of the part, etching in the loneliness and insecurity Mrs. Banks endures. White also has a nice chemistry with her Purcell, who finds a very human chord in Velasco, so that the character never appears too hammy. Brian Lafontaine is also pitch-perfect in several scenes as a telephone repairman; I'd love to see what he can do with a bigger role some time.

I mentioned the furniture move between the first and second act; there is also another intermission between the second and third acts, which I presume is done to allow for costume changes. I wish there was a way to eliminate the second intermission; it does break up the momentum, and the third act is too short to require being broken out. Nonetheless, Stacey Berman's period costumes deserve praise, as do Travis McHale's set and lighting design.

This production is a pure joy. Though *Barefoot* is set in the winter, it unquestionably rates as one of the must-see shows of this summer season.



White and Middleton scope out her apartment.
Photo Credit:Randy Morrison