



PALM BEACH ARTSPAPER

Palm Beach ArtsPaper

Maltz cast shines in Simon's 'Brighton Beach Memoirs'

By Hap Erstein

February 29, 2020



Anthony Zambito as Eugene in Brighton Beach Memoirs. (Photo by Zak Bennett)

There has never been, and in all likelihood will never be, an American playwright as commercially successful as the late Neil Simon.

From his Broadway debut in 1961 with *Come Blow Your Horn*, he has convulsed audiences in laughter season after season. But it wasn't until 22 years later, with *Brighton Beach Memoirs*, that he eased up on his joke reflex, explored his own ethnic roots and plumbed the pain lurking underneath the comedy. Of his 30-plus plays, it is unquestionably one of his best, most honest and least sentimental works, an assessment borne out by the first-rate production on view now at the Maltz Jupiter Theatre.

It is Simon's recollection of his crisis-laden childhood, growing up poor and guilt-ridden in pre-World War II Brooklyn, suffering through liver and cabbage dinners ("a Jewish medieval torture"), sprinting to the grocery store to buy butter (a quarter-pound at a time) and lusting after his cousin Nora (who has started

to show signs of puberty).

Simon's alter ego is a smart-alecky teen named Eugene Morris Jerome, who narrates the play, conspiratorially confiding in the audience and writing in his notebook the unintentionally funny lines he hears his family spout. After all, he promises himself, "one day I'll put all this in a book or a play." If it becomes a play, may he have the good fortune of employing an actor with such killer comic timing as gangly Anthony Zambito.

The year is 1937, the depths of the Depression, and money is scarce at the Jerome household. Their financial situation only got worse three years earlier when matriarch Kate's widowed sister Blanche moved in with her two daughters, Nora and Laurie. Eugene idolizes his older brother Stanley, even if he is a perpetual screw-up, nearly losing his job and gambling away his meager but valued salary. So support of the extended family falls to Eugene's dad Jack, who takes on multiple jobs, working himself into exhaustion and a heart attack.

All of this might have been tragic fodder for Simon's personal idol, Eugene O'Neill, but Simon manages to convey how dire their situation is with an air of wry humor. In the first act, we are never far from a hearty laugh, but the play deepens and darkens in the second half as it explores the consequences of sibling jealousy, dignity in the face of poverty and the enduring strength of family.



Margery Lowe and Laura Turnbull in Brighton Beach Memoirs. (Photo by Zak Bennett)

As we watch matters unfold through Eugene's eyes, the charismatic Zambito is the focus of the Maltz production. But thanks in large part to the assured, though invisible direction by J. Barry Lewis, there is not a weak link in the seven-member ensemble.

The husband-and-wife team of Avi Hoffman and Laura Turnbull are strong presences among the cast members. He is weary and wise as put-upon Jack, while she is even better as Kate, the fulcrum of the family unit, whose long repressed resentments eventually surface late in the evening.

Alex Walton's Stanley brims with sincerity and brotherly wisdom and Margery Lowe is an empathy magnet as Blanche, reaching out for a second chance at happiness with the Irishman across the street.

Anne Mundell's multi-level scenic design for the Jerome household is probably roomier than it should be, but she also suggests the neighboring buildings that loom just outside their home. Kirk Bookman's lighting aptly seems more drama than comedy and Tracy Dorman's costumes are idealized period duds.

As those who know the Simon canon know, Brighton Beach Memoirs is just the beginning of Eugene's story. It is the first of a trilogy, and arguably the best of the three plays, but here's hoping that the Maltz is planning to let the other two shoes drop in future seasons.

BRIGHTON BEACH MEMOIRS, Maltz Jupiter Theatre, 1001 E. Indiantown Road, Jupiter. Through Sunday, March 8. \$62 and up. 561-575-2223.