

# Worrall Community Newspapers

**Essex Journal Review-Kiss of the Spider Woman**

*By Ruth Ross*

It's not your mama's musical comedy. Set in an unnamed Latin American totalitarian state's prison for deviants, sexual and political, 4<sup>th</sup> Wall Theatre's current production of Kander and Ebb's "Kiss of the Spider Woman" is searing, seamless and nothing short of genius!

In the tradition of their great musical "Cabaret," the dynamic duo—and Terrence McNally, who wrote the book—has used Manuel Puig's novel to make political and social commentary, replacing the Kit Kat Girls with a chorus of bruised and battered prison inmates and the MC with an equally malevolent warden.

"Kiss of the Spider Woman" examines the relationship between the prison's odd couple, homosexual window dresser-film addict Luis Molina and his cell mate, macho political dissident Valentin. To maintain his sanity, Molina recounts the plots of films starring his favorite actress, Aurora, driving Valentin nuts with his non-stop chatter. Approached by the warden to provide names Valentin might reveal in his sleep in return for an early release. Molina's dilemma becomes even more troubling by his growing love for the revolutionary. As Valentin finds his feelings toward Molina undergoing a change, boundaries are broken, lines are crossed and we begin to care very deeply for these two men.

On the main stage at 12 Miles West in Bloomfield, an area of the theater still under renovation, director Greg Allen and set designers Bruce McCandless and Carl Schmidt keep the action moving at a steady, inexorable pace with scene changes effected by prisoners moving construction scaffolding around so quickly and effortlessly that blackouts are short and not distracting. Sean Hennessy's atmospheric lighting directs the eye to various venues and the use of projected slides and dumb shows on a rear "inner stage" extend the actions beautifully without sacrificing the intimacy sought by Allen.

To the accompaniment of a three piece band led by musical director Matt Rupcich, the talented actors sing Kander and Ebb's haunting music and lyrics with style. As Molina, Jason Tamashausky is wonderful, his beautiful voice celebrating Aurora and fervently communicating his growing feelings for Valentin. Alex Kanter's portrayal of Valentin is equally as strong as he turns a taciturn, uptight radical into a human being with the emphasis on human.

In supporting roles, Frank Malvasi's warden is one scary guy; Joan Ludwig is heart-breaking as Molina's mother; Dorothy Dubkowski is lovely as Valentin's girlfriend Marta, and Bruce McCandless shines as Molina's object d'amour, Gabriel.

The rest of the ensemble, comprised of Mike Levine, Richard Colonna, Todd Squitieri, John rice, David Seda and Anthony DiBella as prisoners and Brigitte Decaudain and Desiree Caro sing well and nimbly execute Stacy Coppola's choreography. Unfortunately, the weakest link is Roxanna Arrojo as Aurora/The Spider Woman. Her singing is often drowned out by the band and she's not very sinuous or sensuous in executing her dance moves or putting across her musical numbers.

That aside, 4<sup>th</sup> Wall Theatre's enthralling production of "Kiss of the Spider Woman" is well worth a trip to Bloomfield. Although some of the language, adult themes and fleeting nudity make the play unsuitable for youngsters, the complex score, magnificent singing and ingenious staging make this a memorable and powerful theatrical event. Bravo 4<sup>th</sup> Wall!!