



Accelerando by Lisa Loomer
Directed by Brandon Ray

REVIEWS

Chicago Sun-Times, March 3, 2006

TWO WARPED SOULS TRY FOR LOVE

Lisa Loomer may be more widely known as a screenwriter for the 1999 film "Girl, Interrupted." But she also is a playwright of genuine imagination and substance, as demonstrated in such winning tragicomedies as "Living Out" (about a Salvadoran nanny and her yuppie employers) and "The Waiting Room" (a time-traveling meditation on women, medicine and the pursuit of beauty).

In "Accelerando" (or "speeded up"), which opened Wednesday night in director Brandon Ray's creatively staged and aptly lighthearted and absurd production for New Leaf Theatre, Loomer also appears to be a woman heart-racingly ahead of her time. Though this offbeat (or, more accurately, "beat-the-clock") romantic comedy was first produced in 1991, it possesses an eerie post-Sept. 11 aura as it poses such questions as: What is of the greatest lasting value, love or art? And in a world that now seems to move so fast -- with so much calamity and change crammed into an increasingly fast-paced existence -- shouldn't people just hurry up and grab whatever experience they hope to have?

To find the answer, Loomer sets up a meet-cute relationship that plays out in 12 scenes over 12 hours. The clock begins to tick at the cocktail party encounter between She (the charming and quirky Georgann Charuhas), a dancer in search of love, and He (a perfectly schlumpy but self-absorbed Michael Derting), a musician and filmmaker in search of immortality. The two progress to a restless night in bed and their morning-after fate. With time being what it is, "about last night" is the equivalent of a lifetime. And love easily can become a casualty.

Adding zest and humor to this rapid-fire romance is how both She and He must grapple with the constant psychic presence or "haunting" by their respective mothers, who barge into their dreams. Her Mami (the comically over-the-top Isabel Quintero) is a mambo-loving Puerto Rican woman with an unhappy marriage behind her, and a habit of tearing down her daughter's confidence. His Mother (the incestuously over-the-top Annie Slivinski) is a thwarted concert pianist who lost all concentration after marriage and the birth of her son, and she tries to preserve her artist child. A mock vote by the audience decides the lovers' fate.

Orchestrating all these creatures who go bump in the night is the Musician (neat work by Tiffany Joy Ross), who embodies the warped souls of both She and He. John Sundling's modernist karma set and Matthew J. Mefford's artful projections lift the field-house aura from the Lincoln Park Cultural Center space.

RECOMMENDED

- *Hedy Weiss*



Chicago Tribune, March 4, 2006

Rainer Maria Rilke observed, "Somewhere there is an ancient enmity between our daily life and the great work," but that doesn't stop the lovers in Lisa Loomer's 1991 absurdist romantic comedy "Accelerando" from trying to bridge the forbidding gulf between Art and Life in one night.

Then again, as She (the characters have no names) observes in a monologue at the outset of the play, time and history itself are racing along at ever-increasing rates (hence the play's title). Sidelined by injury from her dance career, She is obsessed with the notion that there is very little time left for the planet, and has created a calendar in which each 500-year increment of history is treated as if it were one month. Eager to find enduring love, she goes home with a man she meets at a New Year's party. He wants to leave his mark on the world as an artist, and is torn between practicing his bassoon and working on his film, which (irony alert!) he claims is about love.

Essentially, what Loomer has created here is a version of Terrence McNally's "Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune" cross-bred with the Manhattan-centric neurotic eroticism of Woody Allen's "Annie Hall" era. The problem is that her play has neither the desperate last-chance urgency of the former nor the bitter-sweet charm of the latter. Brandon Ray's staging for New Leaf Theatre has some clever touches and occasionally endearing performances, but Loomer's tendency to bludgeon us with undergraduate-level psychology and random acts of wackiness waters down the story's appeal.

Both She and He are (of course) in conflict with their mothers, who appear as dream figures during the night of their hookup. But since He is of vaguely WASP origins, his mother (of course) is a thwarted classical pianist clad in pearls who resents her son, while half-Latina She has a Puerto Rican mother who (of course) works in a factory, wears too-tight clothing and too many bangle bracelets, and worries that her daughter will end up with the wrong man.

Ray's cast, particularly Georgann Charuhas as She, works hard to deliver the sometimes-stilted dialogue with grace. Michael Derting's He has the character's annoying demeanor -- simultaneously smug and insecure -- down so pat that one wonders how this guy ever gets any action at all. Tiffany Joy Ross delights as the silent chorus who provides the occasional sound cue and mimed reactions to the onstage shenanigans. But Loomer's frenetic desire to touch on the Big Themes in the context of a Little Show means that she consistently overplays her hand. Will these two end up together? Should they? By the end, it's hard to believe that it really matters much at all.

- *Kerry Reid*

Chicago Reader, March 10, 2006

New Leaf Theatre is billing Lisa Loomer's odd, intriguing play as a romantic comedy. Girl meets boy, and in a single night they fall in love and into bed, then fall out over issues like marriage, kids, and the importance of art in history. Loomer aims to provoke, but under Brandon Ray's direction, this production can be plodding. Isabel Quintero offers ethnic stereotypes as the girl's Mami, but at least she's energetic: no one else in the cast has her vigor. The two protagonists, portrayed generically by Georgann Charuhas and Michael Derting, fail to make much of an impression. Though entertaining at times, the couple's lonely search for love evokes little empathy.

- *Jenn Goddu*



Chicago Critic.com, March 3, 2006

New Leaf Theatre Company has produced several quirky, well performed shows over the last few years. Their latest, *Accelerando*, is a stylistic multi-media romantic comedy with a refreshingly different take on the classic 'boy-meets girl' show. The relationship between love and time is explored in a funny, smartly written show that is part fable, part fantasy grounded in unusual staging with the effective use of a mime, video projection and direct discourse with the audience.

I liked this funny, off the wall comedy that features a classical musician and filmmaker (Michael Derting) whose passion for art overwhelms him. She (Georgan Charuhas) is a dancer seeking love. She uses the calendar to cover the history of mankind as she tries to come to an understanding of the effects of time. Playwright Lisa Loomer shows the relationship of love, time, art and history as we see that when we are in love, time stands still or does it?

The two mothers interrupt the two lovers who spend much of the show in his bedroom. Both are haunted by nightmares of past loves and the nagging of their mothers. Time moves so fast that a nighttime romp can be a lifetime of pleasure.

With terrific chorus work underscoring the action by Tiffany Joy Ross and fine work from Isabel Quintero (as Mami, She's mother) and Annie Silivinski (as He's mother) *Accelerando* unfolds as a sexy, cute provocative love story. We hear personal monologues from He and She as the two explore the temptation of love from the meeting to the seduction to wild sex to the thoughts of long-term commitment. The struggle between our accomplishments and our relationships is interestingly presented in this romantic comedy. While a funny show, *Accelerando* has layers of themes each presented quite theatrically.

Terrific technical work (kudos to sound designer Nick Keenan, lighting by Jared Moore and Matthew J. Mefford's projections design) together with brisk pacing and effective ensemble work by the actors (especially Michael Derting and Isabel Quintero) make this delightful weird romance a real treat. Our disconnected, frantic paced lives are satirized as a wake up call.

Do they become a couple or is it a one night stand? See this show and find out—you'll enjoy this funny, imaginative play.

RECOMMENDED

- *Tom Williams*



Time Out Chicago, March 9, 2006

Why is it that whenever someone writes a play about how hard it is to connect in These Modern Times, the result is a traditional boy-meets-girl story with some cleverness grafted on to it? Exhibit Y: *Accelerando*, which wants to be the story of musician-filmmaker He and ex-dancer She. Clearly, Loomer's trying to synthesize a theory of Everything into a philosopher's rom-com for the stage, and she pulls out every trick in the book to do it: projection screens and scene titles, people who aren't there, visions of past lives, direct address and even an audience vote. But Loomer's strength isn't her novelty; it's her earnestness, and she is at her best when she's not trying to be Tom Stoppard, and takes her own less heady but by no means insignificant voice out for a spin.

Likewise, New Leaf's production cruises when it lets Charuhas and Derting dig into their relationship unhindered by the nutty, reality-bending trickery, but there are potholes galore. The complicated technical aspects seemed to misfire as often as they hit (at least on opening night), the pacing is loose, and both the beginning and ending wink far, far too much at the audience. But in between, when Ray and his cast tap into the sincerity buried in the script, they infuse even the couple's ethereal mothers (who could easily be played à la *Everybody Loves Raymond*) with the weight of people we know: laughably absurd and depressingly desperate for purpose.

- *Dan Granata*

Windy City Times, March 15, 2006

On New Year's eve, a girl named "She" meets a boy named "He," and they repair to his Manhattan loft, there spending the night together. That's our play's plot. Ah, but She, a dancer recovering from a foot injury, is occupied in constructing a "history calendar," each month equal to 500 years, so time is not measured as WE perceive it. He, a classical bassoonist who wants to be a filmmaker, is a bundle of Oedipal neuroses swaddled in an insular universe where She is quickly reduced to the role of supporting character. (Upon learning that She is half Puerto-Rican, He promptly exclaims, "You Latina girls are so metaphysical!")

If this sounds like a heavy load of literary flourish for a one-night stand, it's just the beginning. Before the night/lifetime is over, the lovers have been haunted by their spectral mothers—He's is a hypersensitive valkyrie who squabbles with his father in a pseudo-operatic duet, and She's, a stereotypical Mamasota in high-heeled mules and clattering bracelets. We are also introduced to a Hindi cupid—NOT named "Kama Sutra"—who provides sound effects, props and auxiliary personnel. But the second act is dominated by fourth-wall breakdown, in which He and She not only address the audience, but pretend to seek our opinions on what to do next. (Significantly, the question of whether to continue the play or terminate it immediately never comes up for a vote.)

Playwright Lisa Loomer obviously adores these navel-gazing egotists. (Before making love, She asks if He has "one of those things", whereupon He proceeds to recite a lengthy thesaurus of synonyms for "condom.") And the New Leaf Theatre Company strives mightily to make us love them, too. Georgann Charuhas and Michael Derting's vulnerable She and volatile He, Annie Slivinski and Isabel Quintero's twin-gargoyle matriarchs, and Tiffany Joy Ross' impish Musician, along with Nick Keenan's sound design, Matthew J. Mefford's video projections, and Brandon Ray's inventive stage business, struggle to mine substance from beneath the style. But all their industry cannot disguise Loomer's smug self-assurance regarding the patience of theatre-goers asked to pay for the privilege of listening to her argue with herself.

- *Mary Shen Barnidge*

NEW LEAF THEATRE