

GEVA 2015-16 Dancing Lessons

April 14 – May 1, 2016

By Mark St. Germain

Directed by Rachel Lampert

A Kitchen Theatre Company production

Fielding Nextstage Studio Series

90 minutes, no intermission.

Appropriate for ages 13 and up.

Two lonely souls embark on a relationship filled with surprising discoveries. A high-functioning young man with Asperger's Syndrome seeks the instruction of a Broadway dancer, now sidelined with injuries. As their relationship unfolds, they're caught off-guard by the unexpected revelations – both hilarious and heartwarming – that they make about each other. A new romantic comedy from the author of *Freud's Last Session* about an unlikely relationship and the healing power of love.

By SYLVIANE GOLD FEB. 6, 2015 NYTimes

As the 90 minutes of this charming new two-character play by [Mark St. Germain](#) unfold at [TheaterWorks in Hartford](#), Ever Montgomery and Senga Quinn finally become acquainted, and we learn that they aren't merely slaves to Manhattan manners. Their aloof behavior goes deeper than that, to the very core of their lives. Senga's world, it turns out, begins and ends with her currently interrupted dance career; and Ever, a science professor, has [Asperger's syndrome](#), an autism-spectrum disorder that makes routine social interaction difficult if not impossible.

So when Ever appears at Senga's door with a bizarre proposition — he will pay her an outrageous sum if she will teach him a few moves to help him avoid embarrassment at a dinner dance — the plot can take us in several directions. It can turn into a fish-out-of-water comedy, an odd-couple romance or a compassionate, understanding-autism homily.

In the end, "Dancing Lessons" is a touching, entertaining blend of all three, as well as a brief illustrated lecture on climate change, thanks to the adroit writing of Mr. St. Germain, a shrewd specialist in matters of human psychology ("Becoming Dr. Ruth" and "Freud's Last Session") and the lively direction of [Julianne Boyd](#). Then there are the superb performances of [Paige Davis](#) as Senga and [Andrew Benator](#) as Ever.

Ms. Davis's exuberant personality, familiar to viewers of the TLC home-décor series "[Trading Spaces](#)," disappears into her mopey, prickly character, embittered by the accident that destroyed her left knee and resentful of the full-length leg brace that may never come off. Senga allays her pain with fistfuls of pills, armloads of crunchy junk food and large quantities of liquor, often straight from the bottle. Her first words to the upstairs neighbor knocking on her door are, "Go away!" — even before she knows how awkward and strange he is.

Ever's conversation is as quirky as his reason for inviting himself into Senga's apartment, and his offbeat aperçus — about sports, musicals, John Hughes movies and other things he has trouble comprehending — can be hilarious. (His social isolation is underlined by Sara Jean Tosetti's simple, please-don't-notice-me costumes.)

Among many pleasures to be derived from these performances is the realization that Senga's responses to Ever's eccentricities — surprise, amusement, then affection — echo our own. Ms. Davis, who created the role when the play had its world premiere last summer at [Barrington Stage Company](#) in Massachusetts, is a terrific listener, her pert features registering Senga's every reaction.

Needless to say, the play asks us to think about which of these two characters is more impaired, the one hobbled by a heavy medical apparatus or the one hobbled by an inability to respond appropriately to social cues. Remember, the one who says, "Go away!" is the one the world considers normal.

Finally, when this pair gets down to the business deal that gives the play its title, Ms. Boyd and her two actors give us passages of winning, sublimely timed physical comedy. And the toothy grimace that contorts Mr. Benator's face when Senga urges Ever to smile provides a striking example of the communications gap between those Ever calls "neurotypicals" and those on the autism spectrum.

Barrington Stage Company; Reviews by Fred Sokol

As beautifully complex a play as one could envision, the world premiere of *Dancing Lessons* by Mark St. Germain is the must-see production as the Berkshires winds down its terrific summer season. Continuing at Barrington Stage Company in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, through August 24th, the 95 minute show features illuminating performances by both John Cariani and Paige Davis.

St. Germain has given us *Freud's Last Session Dr. Ruth*, *All the Way* and *The Best of Enemies* and much more. The current work, benefitting from Julianne Boyd's adept direction, is non-historical. *Dancing Lessons* will enjoy a long, long life in theater. Cariani and Davis are individually and collectively evocative—and tender.

Unless one is present in the rehearsal hall, it is literally impossible to determine just how a director sculpts a show and coaxes enduring performance. Julianne Boyd, who is BSC artistic director, knew that John Cariani should play the role of Ever Montgomery, a man with Asperger's, in *Dancing Lessons*. So, too, Boyd wanted an actual Broadway dancer to play the badly injured Broadway dancer Ever approaches when he wishes to learn how to dance. Boyd, as director, is catalytic.

Cariani hesitantly comes to the door of the apartment occupied by Senga Quinn (Davis); Cariani is already into character, already on. She, living somewhere on the Upper West Side, is gloomy: she has torn two major ligaments in her leg, hobbles about with a cumbersome-looking brace limiting her every movement. The last thing she wants to field is a request from a nerved-out New York Institute of Technology Professor of Geosciences to teach him how to dance. She would rather shut him out immediately. But, she does not. He also happens to live on an upper floor of the same building.

St. Germain establishes a dramatic question almost immediately which is: How can these seemingly mismatched souls possibly get along for more than 30 seconds? She is down on her fortune and seemingly content to sit in her studio apartment listening to music, eating chips, wallowing. He, herky-jerky of movement and quirky of manner, is professionally successful but socially, shall we say, awkward and nearly terrified through his lack of confidence. Consider some sample dialogue. Senga, early, says, "I recognize desperation." Ever knows his situation: "One in 68 children is diagnosed as Autistic." Still, his mathematical acuity has limits and he asks, "Why would I make jokes if I don't understand them?" Senga later tells him that, "Your body does more than just carry your head around." Ultimately, she will self-assess: "My whole life is a lie. I'm a dancer who can't dance."

This is a breathtaking, heartbreaking play yet one filled, at times, with delectable comedy. Cariani, as he proved at BSC last summer in *Much Ado About Nothing* as Dogberry, has masterful timing and unique physicality. A distinctive actor, he does not become his character but rather slides into Ever's skin with uncanny ease. Cariani has been on many television series, was nominated for a Tony Award for his portrayal of Motel the tailor in *Fiddler on the Roof*, and is a highly regarded playwright. Davis, with Broadway appearances as Roxie Hart in *Chicago* and as Gloria in *Boeing-Boeing*, finds the nuanced poignancy within Senga. Davis is poised, comfortable, intimate, and altogether winsome. The actors, who seem to know one another's characters precisely, perform with unusual feel and fluency. This belies the degree of difficulty accompanying

these roles. Obviously, they have been rehearsing hard while studying autism and Asperger's in order to master the subject matter.

To say anything further would destroy the spontaneity to be enjoyed by witnessing this truly inspiring production. Convincing through natural performances by most proficient actors, *Dancing Lessons* makes its pivot upon the conflict between Ever and Senga. That established, the drama, inclusive of romance, is enveloping. St. Germain opens a window to the life of a high-functioning individual, Ever, who is dealing with Asperger's—and with Senga, too. The designers for this production are proactive. Costumer Sara Jean Tosetti's choices are perfect; and James J. Fenton provides a very full and recognizable residence where Senga lives. Additionally, key projections are supplied by Jeff Roudabush.

The mix of language, performance, feel, and coordination sets *Dancing Lessons* distinctively and admirably apart. This production, so moving and highly artistic, sustains far beyond its closing moments.

Dancing Lessons continues on the main stage at Barrington Stage Company in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, through August 24th. For tickets, call (413) 236-8888 or visit barringtonstageco.org.