What do Picasso, Einstein, and Steve Martin have in common, apart from the obvious? Come along to a must-see performance of *Picasso at the Lapin Agile* at Vienna Theatre Company and you shall not only be enlightened but also thoroughly entertained!

The trio makes an unlikely combination which may seem odd to those unaware that Steve Martin, a comic actor, is also a playwright, and that Picasso and Einstein are the two leading characters in his first play *Picasso at the Lapin Agile*. “Focusing on Einstein’s *Special Theory of Relativity* and Picasso’s master painting, *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*, the play attempts to explain, in a light-hearted way, the similarity of the creative process involved in great leaps of imagination in art and science”, is how Martin explained his vision for the play in an editorial he wrote on March 13, 2009 edition of The Observer).

The play premiered in Chicago in 1993 and was later staged in Boston and Los Angeles, as well as New York where, in 1996, it received the New York Outer Critics’ Award for Best Play and Best Playwright. When interviewed by Los Angeles Times in 1994, Martin said that his idea for the play had come from the Picasso’s painting *Au Lapin Agile*, named after a Parisian café ‘Lapin Agile’ the painter frequented in the early 1900s. Martin not only used the painting and its times as inspiration, but ‘borrowed’ the café in its entirety and turned it into a set for his absurdist play in which the future interferes with the present.

It is 1904, 25 year-old Einstein about to publish the theory of special relativity, enters the bar and introduces himself. He relaxes with a drink waiting for a date unaware of his forthcoming meeting with Pablo Picasso, also young and on the brink of launching Cubism into the 20th century. The encounter of the two geniuses results in a quick ‘art versus science’ duel, and is followed by absorbing and funny exchanges about the process of creation, art and science, life and women, present and future. The conversation involves the bar staff and patrons and is interrupted by the appearance of a number of eccentric characters, such as inventor Schmendiman, a Countess, and a nameless time traveler visitor, easily assumed to be Elvis Presley.

The strength of the play lies in its intelligent, whacky humor and dialogs (dotted with some less subtle, macho interjections) and the colorful, funny, well-rounded characters and their interactions. Casting and direction were crucial to materialize the rather plotless play’s mission to absorb audiences and keep them entertained throughout the 90 minute run without an intermission and a set change.

Hats off to the Director Patricia Boswell Kallman for breaking a time barrier and turning 90 minutes into a captivating moment of high caliber, riveting, and seamless entertainment. Each scene is engaging and exciting, each actor fully in character, well cast and matched as a team. The stage is a busy place, drawing us in with its colorful and funny personas, witty and at times absurd exchanges and situations; and slowing down on a couple of occasions to achieve a ‘frozen in time’ effect.

Robert King (Pablo Picasso) and David Carter (Albert Einstein) are great as cheeky and suave artist and confident and slightly reserved scientist. The bar staff and patrons: Stu Fischer (Freddy, the owner and bartender), Annie Ermlick (Germaine, the waitress), Joseph LeBlanc (Gaston, an incontinent bar patron) and Melissa Dunlap (Suzanne/Female Admirer) are equally excellent in their roles. So are Bill Byrnes (Sagot, an Art Dealer) and John Totten (Schmendiman, an Inventor), who enrich the play with their characteristic voices and mannerisms. Patricia Beaubrun-Reese complements the cast very well in her debut as The Countess. Watching talented Ian Burns (A
Visitor, assumed Elvis Presley), a born Elvis impersonator, and listening to his melodic voice feels like listening to Elvis himself singing his favorite songs. Tunes played before the performance transported us to Paris, but once the curtain rose the music became spurious, as the ‘mise en scene’ combined with the colorful characters and their dynamics, created their own Montmartre flavored ‘symphony.’

Set Designers John Vasko, Mary MacFarlane, and their team did an excellent job bringing the Parisian café to life without being too obvious. The colors, furnishings, and the ‘fleur de lys’ wallpaper design sufficiently represent the space and its time. Avoiding easy solutions, such as adoring walls with depictions of the Eiffel Tower and/or Notre Dame and using mostly empty picture frames instead, appears to be intentional and to serve a double purpose. The symbolic character of the frames emphasizes one of the play’s messages – relevance of boundaries, such as time or physical limits, in relation to their content, be it art, science or life. Fragmenting the main wall into three separate sections, albeit discreetly, reminds us that we are not watching a traditional play, but an absurdist one. In Steve Martin’s creation, time itself is disassembled with fragments of future intruding into present and bringing in time travelers for a visit. The wall panels are curved, cleverly referencing Einstein’s then ‘crazy’ theories and the fickleness of human perception.

The colorful and continuously ‘buzzing’ stage creates a ‘picture’ and a ‘costume’ on its own without needing unnecessary ornamentation. The costumes by Costume Designer Eva Sanchez, complement the characters and make them fit perfectly with the overall feel of the play and its purpose without usurping too much attention. The female characters are feminine and alluring without being ‘over the top. Einstein is dressed in a vested suit, bow tie, and a pencil behind his ear – a perfect image of a nerdy scientist. A womanizing Picasso is suave-looking in his black and white attire, while moronic Schmendiman appears deservedly clownish in appearance; A Visitor wearing a modest but poignant version of Elvis-like attire does not overpower but makes a point with his blue suede shoes. And the Countess? Well she looks like one. And the bar owner and the barfly could have walked out of a 1990’s Parisian bistro a minute ago.

Lighting Designer Stacy King and Sound Designer Ben Allen also contributed to the success of the opening night. Their beautiful starry night’s lighting effect framed one of the ending scenes perfectly. Congratulations to the Director and all the actors and the production team for an excellent show, and thank you for the non-stop laughter which kept coming in droves.

Running Time: 90 minutes, without an intermission.

_Picasso at the Lapine Agile_ plays through November 3, 2013 at _Vienna Theatre Company_ – 120 Cherry Street, SE, in Vienna, VA. Purchase tickets in advance at the Vienna Community Center, or at the door prior to the show.

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