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Review: 'Frankie' starts loudly, is quietly moving

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The stage is dark when the show opens, but it's not hard to guess what's going on.

Two voices. Heavy panting. Shrieks of delight.

When the lights finally come up over Change's production of "Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune," two naked bodies are canoodling in bed, shaking with such laughter that one soon tumbles to the floor.

It's a rowdy start to what turns out to be a nuanced and quietly moving show. The story, written by Terrence McNally in 1987 and directed here by Michael Cornelison, unfolds like a novel in which the action matters less than the characters themselves.

In this case, the characters are easy to keep straight: Frankie (Suzie Oddy) is a waitress, Johnny (Suzie's husband, David) is a short-order cook. Both work in the same ordinary New York diner, meet for a first date and wind up in bed in her shabby apartment.

When the deed is done, she expects him to go. But he doesn't take the hint.

"We got off to a great start. Why do you want to stop?" he asks. "We may not make it to tomorrow. I might get knifed if you make me go home. You might choke on a chicken bone. Unknown poison gases could kill us both in our sleep. When it comes to love, life's cheap and it's short."

For the rest of their night together - and the 2½-hour show - the pair reveals increasingly personal aspects about their lives. She likes meatloaf, wants to be a teacher, can't have kids. He's allergic to peaches, used to be married, used to be in jail.

The list of quirks might seem tedious in less capable hands, but the Oddys play off each other so well that each detail contributes to an intriguing portrait of two people on the brink of real love.

David Oddy can barely sit still, bouncing around the stage with his character's optimism. His rough-edged voice belies a sensitive core.

Suzy Oddy plays it cool, shifting between vulnerable and stand-offish.

"You know, you're a very intense person," she tells him. "If you sent me a million roses, I wouldn't know where to put them. I don't need a million roses. One would be just fine."

But the two try to work things out, with nudges from the usual romantic cues. Music plays softly over the radio. Moonlight spills in through the windows. (Chris Nelson and Jim Trenberth designed the sound and lighting, respectively. Thatcher Williams designed the set.)

Nothing huge happens by the time the moon melts into the dawn, except that two people have found each other. And really, is any story more interesting - or tangled - than that?

Additional Facts

"Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune"

Presented by Change

WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Thursday through Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday.

WHERE: Grand View University's Viking Theatre, 2811 E. 14th St.

TICKETS: \$12 for adults, \$10 for seniors and students

INFORMATION: (515) 771-7766, theaterforachange.com

NOTE: The show includes adult language and extended nudity.