Written by Jill Walsh
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Before Pablo Picasso and Albert Einstein became icons of the 20th Century, they were dreamers. Steve Martin thinks so anyway. In his 1996 play *Picasso at the Lapin Agile*, Martin explores the unusual (fictional) meeting of young artist Picasso and science genius Einstein before they created history-changing works and ideas – during a time they had only the visions in their heads to rely on. Richmond Hill Players is performing the play in Geneseo through October 13.

Any artist or dreamer will appreciate Martin's script because it is full of beautiful, familiar imagery and language. Einstein describes his ideas as "having the stars come out in my head." Picasso dreams of the moment he will achieve greatness: "At that moment, I am speaking for everyone; I am dreaming for the billions yet to come; I am taking the part of us that cannot be understood by God, and letting it bleed from the wrist onto the canvas."

The Lapin Agile, a small bar in Paris, hosts the action of the play. Although Picasso's and Einstein's talents fall on seemingly opposite ends of the spectrum, they discover how similar their thoughts, ideas, and personalities might be. Also making memorable appearances are the cynical Frenchman Gaston, the bartender Freddie, his no-nonsense girlfriend Germaine, and Picasso's young lover Suzanne.

Martin does a nice job focusing on each character at different points in the play, and not only on the lives of Picasso and Einstein. Though there are plenty of lighthearted moments in the play, the most memorable are the truly breathtaking memories the characters re-live. Each person has a story – of lost love, of artistic realization, or of ideas just out of reach. Gaston swoons over a lover he lost to natural causes, and Suzanne re-creates the passionate evening she and Picasso spent together. These moments add a personal quality to seeing the play or reading the script, because it's easier to relate to the experiences of the characters. Martin is unconventionally serious and philosophical, and focuses on the inner qualities of what it means to create.

Though Martin is usually recognized for his quirky, charming comic personality in films such as *Roxanne* and *L.A. Story*, he is more versatile than some people recognize. In addition to starring in both those movies, he wrote the screenplays. And a few years ago, he released the well-received novella *Shopgirl*.

In 1996, Martin decided to write in a different medium – theatre. *Picasso at the Lapin Agile* is his best-known and most frequently performed work, and Richmond Hill's current production at the Barn Theatre is a faithful adaptation.

Given the high esteem in which I hold this script, Richmond Hill pulled off a mostly enjoyable performance. There were moments when I found it difficult to believe the motivations of the characters because of certain staging choices, such as the unbelievably long "chase" between the photographer Sargot and Picasso around a table for no apparent reason. A backstage crew

member halted the action with an air horn during one of Picasso's speeches because he accidentally used foul language. The language is in the script, but the interruption is not, and though the audience found the incident funny, it drew attention away from what was being said.

Picasso is played by a fresh, young Ken Ohr, who created a passionate character with obvious lusts for life, art, and love. Ohr is powerful during the love scenes with Suzanne, and when explaining how he is able to make beautiful art.

Scott Hoyt wonderfully portrays the wisecracking, lusty Gaston. His timing is dead-on, making his one-liners crackle.

I was disappointed, however, with Chris Falgiani, who is an appropriate physical match for Einstein but not as capable at delivering Martin's passionately written lines. Though the combination of his innocence and wit is charming, Falgiani falls short of effectively portraying the mathematical genius.

Suzanne (Ryan Mosher) was also a bit shaky convincing the audience that she was Picasso's young, coquettish lover. Her walk was forced and unnatural, and caused the rest of her lustful conversation and actions to appear phony.

The Lapin Agile was nicely presented, with audience members even occupying a back table of the bar and interacting with the characters throughout the show. Because this play is mostly presentational – performed with the awareness of an audience – the conventions of realism aren't necessary, and boundaries between audience and cast become nonexistent. The actual stage design worked nicely in the floor space offered at Richmond Hill, because the central action occurs in a single setting – around the bar of the Lapin Agile.

Because of my fondness for the script, any company that takes on this wonderful piece is worthy of praise in my book. Richmond Hill's (mostly) by-the-book interpretation of *Picasso at the Lapin Agile*
is capable and filled with passion and vigor.

Richmond Hill presents Steve Martin's Picasso at the Lapin Agile *on October 10, 11, and 12 at 8 p.m., and October 13 at 4 p.m. in the Barn Theatre in Geneseo Richmond Hill Park. Tickets are $7. For more information or to make reservations, visit (http://www.rhplayers.com).*