Tension fills ‘Eugenia,’ drama of sexual identity and murder

BY JAMES E. COTTER
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NEW PALTZ – Like Viola in Shakespeare’s “Twelfth Night,” “Eugenia” by Lorae Parry tells of a young Italian girl who assumes the identity of a man, calling herself Jack. Instead of Illyria, the play, which is loosely based on a true story, is set in Wellington, New Zealand, where Parry lives.

Eugenia Martelli immigrates to New Zealand in 1916, where she marries a woman and at the time stirs up a social storm that leads to a love triangle and murder.

In a play within a play, a drama teacher is attempting to stage a version of the story for a present-day audience. Controversy surrounds her efforts when people confront their own identities as experienced then and now. Switching sexual gender roles in Shakespeare’s day was a theatrical convention when men played females; in the 20th century it’s another more controversial and complex story on and off stage.

The department of theatre arts at SUNY New Paltz opened with “Eugenia” Thursday evening, and it will continue this weekend and next at the Parker Theatre. Directed by faculty member Anita Gonzalez, six student actors, playing 15 parts and led by Genevieve Bozek in the title role, create a tension-packed drama on an apron stage that summons the audience into the back-and-forth action between present and past.

IF YOU GO...

What: “Eugenia” by Lorae Parry
Where: Parker Theatre, SUNY New Paltz, 1 Hawk Drive, New Paltz
When: 8 p.m. March 3 and 8-10, 2 p.m. March 4 and 11
Admission: $9-$18
Call: 257-3880
Visit: www.newpaltz.edu

The actors play dual roles then and now; they employ a variety of dialects and fashion challenging changes in character.

Bozek plays Eugenia as Jack with high Italian spirit and strong accent; she does a superior job in making her identity as a man an essential and believable choice with a resonant voice and natural nobility. She also portrays Georgina Matheson, who applies for the position of principal at St. Benedict’s school and finds herself caught up in the controversy of writing Eugenia’s story and having it performed at the school.

Loren Moslin plays Violet Donovan as the woman Eugenia marries; she is an ambitious hotel housekeeper and an Irish widow who saves up enough to buy a flower shop in hope of starting a new life. She becomes a victim of her own dreams of love and success. Moslin also plays Iris Robinson, a lesbian who wants to direct the story for today.

Megan Jordan portrays Rosa Bassani, a hotel manager who is attracted to her fellow Italian Jack. At St. Benedict’s she is Lily Thompson, a student who wants to act in the role of Violet but becomes confused when she has to pretend to love another woman, Victoria Stevens, played by Brielle Weiner. The wedding is played in parallel scenes by both pairs of women. Weiner is also Ruby Baker, another hotel female enthralled by Jack’s suave sexual spell.

Brendan Quinn plays Vincent Duggan as Eugenia’s major rival and opponent who sets out to destroy his identity as Jack. Quinn’s Duggan embodies the violence of heterosexual prejudice and hostility. As board President Cooper in the present, he leads the move to have the play canceled. Adam Harrison is Duggan’s bar mate PubJoe, as well as several other characters who perform in the past story and the present play. He is particularly nasty as a bullying loudmouth prosecutor.

Stephen Kitsakos again has composed an original score for this production with Italian themes, including an arrangement of “Bella Ciao,” a traditional partisan song associated with anarchists and revolutionaries, that opens and closes the play. Several ballet mime dances to Cole Porter’s “So in Love,” sung by k.d. lang, add a sensual touch to the melodrama.