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John Monteleone and Andrea Gross in a scene from "Frankie and Johnny at the Clair de Lune" by Terrence McNally at the Renee Fotouhi Gallery.

—Clara Christine Newman Photo

'Frankie and Johnny'

McNally Play at a Gallery Pointed, Touching Delight

By Lee Davis

"Frankie and Johnny in the Claire de Lune," Terrence McNally's thoughtful 1987 work about human loneliness and its partial cure—currently being given a delightful production by the Oddfellows team of Maria Pessino and Jacqui Leader at the Renee Fotouhi Fine Arts Gallery in East Hampton—was conceived as a kind of "Marty" for our time.

Thoroughly distorted and largely trivialized in its film form by the presence of two superstars (Michelle Pfeiffer and Al Pacino) and a bundle of rewritten dialogue, it possessed, in its original, theatrical shape, the sweet-hearted gropings of two of life's ordinary people needing love, needing acceptance, needing loneliness. The fear of being alone in conflict with the fear of belonging run like leitmotifs through the building and the destruction of human relationships, and this is what makes both "Marty" and "Frankie and Johnny" so personally recognizable, and so enduringly true.

Marty made his conquest in a dance hall. For the Eighties, Terrence McNally moved the campaign into a bedroom. The butcher and schoolteacher of the Fifties have become a cook and a waitress in the Nineties. In "Marty," there was a series of verbal gropings while dancing; in "Frankie and Johnny," it's a collection of pre and post-coital conversations. Left to someone with less genius than McNally, (or Paddy Chayevsky, for that matter), the concept is a perilous pit, waiting for a fall.

But nothing like that even remotely happens. The play shines, levitates, whirls on words that refuse to stay earthbound, despite their subject matter. The clever deception of the master playwright of turning what seems to be everyday speech into split-second revelations that raise little fountains of recognition and appreciation in its audience is rampant in this play, as it is in the rest of his work. But this one is beautiful for its economy, its reality, its pointedness. The play proceeds in a

direct line from apprehension to revelation—the classic context of classic drama—but it's done with such airy ease and with such an abundance of humor and humanity, it seems scarcely to touch the ground.

Of course, this demands the same sort of nonchalant brilliance in direction and performance, and Mr. McNally's little masterpiece is in good and loving hands in East Hampton. Maria Pessino has directed with a sure and energetic hand, moving her two actors around the spare suggestion of a claustrophobic New York apartment, placing them almost literally into the laps of a small audience on folding chairs. But more than this. Her fine eye for detail, highspeed pacing, and ability to knit an ensemble serves the play, the actors, and the audience well. Realizing the intimacy of both space and subject matter, she's directed in that spirit, and the result is as comfortable as a gathering of friends.

Which isn't to minimize the performances of Andrea Gross and John Monteleone. They play blithely in sweet proximity, and the evolution of their relationship is a joy to experience.

As Frankie, Andrea Gross balances a clever wall of clever words, a defense mechanism of glibness, with a well of need, changing the balance, withdrawing it, finally offering it with tender effectiveness. She seems to grow both in stature and beauty as the play and her reality unfold.

John Monteleone's Johnny is a finely shaded drawing of a compulsive, sweet, caring and agonizingly uncertain human—in other words, lots of us in our worst and best moments. In the words of Oscar Hammerstein, he's a man who stumbles, but a man who cares, and Mr. Monteleone conveys him with a refreshing complex of blind energy and forgiving gentleness.

"Frankie and Johnnie in the Claire de Lune" is a touching delight, which concludes this weekend at the Renee Fotouhi gallery on Newtown Lane in East Hampton. The box office number is 324-5797.