The stage is whimsically serene. The backdrop features a blue sky with impressionistic poofy, hazy clouds. A desk with carefully strewn work, a set of lawn chairs, a couch, a side table with snacks and another with sparkling crystal bottles are distributed among clusters of birch trees standing tall and straight across the stage.

What appears to be a cutout hit of a white-washed house is set off to the side. It’s a stage that depicts a world that is neither inside nor outside but simultaneously, impossibly, both. It’s the world of the UC Berkeley Department of Theater, Dance and Performance Studies’ production of “Summertime.”

The curtain rises to reveal a scene of a young man and woman. The man, James (Jacob Straus), is looking for someone who can speak Italian; he has been directed to this house. The woman, Tessa (Schuyler Girion), says she speaks Italian. They begin to talk, eventually landing on ideas of love and of life. For a moment, it seems as if the romantic quality of the set and the subject matter of the pair’s dialogue has manifest itself into their budding relationship.

A red umbrella lilts lazily across the backdrop of the sky, and a moment later, a man in a red beret (Matthew Hannon) enters on stage, grabs Tessa and begins to dance.

“Summertime,” written for the stage by Charles Mee, could possibly be categorized as a romantic comedy. But it’s more like a romantic comedy a surrealist has forcefully seized, rewritten and contorted into a comedy of the excesses and impossibilities. For after the initial moments of quirky, witty dialogue between James and Tessa, the love story of two people is pieced and prodded by the lives and loves of all the peoples who inhabit this Wonderland-like corner of the world.

“Summertime” is not the love story of just one couple but of nearly a dozen different possible couple pairings, some of which overlap and all of which are in a state of heated turmoil.

This production, directed by Christopher Herold, captures each of these relationships with precision both in the delivery of the lines and in the physical relationships of the characters on stage. Even disregarding the occasional outbreaks of song and dance — most notably Hannon’s solo dance — this is a show in which action and movement play a vital role.

At any one moment, there are frequently three or more sets of characters across the stage performing unrelated but hilarious activities. This emphasis on action and particularly on continuously spontaneous action among all the characters lends itself to the understanding that love is not private. It is shared — in this case, among a group of slightly off-center, emotionally unstable New Englanders, but shared all the same.

What is lost in this particular adaptation is the generational diversity of the story. Given that all the actors are college-aged, this is understandable. But the different kinds of love depicted in the story are dependent upon the distinctions in the characters of the story — distinctions the young cast simply isn’t always able to realize visually.
At the same time, each actor imbues their character with a distinct and frequently very loud voice. The actors — particularly those who play Francois, Maria, Tessa and James — channel the spirit of their characters quite fully and forcefully, juxtaposing the tranquility of the set to create a thoroughly enjoyable chaos. Occasionally, that chaos tips into the realm of the ridiculous, and the show seems to grasp at laughs simply through the hyperexaggerated performances of its characters. On the whole, the actors successfully balance both the serious and comedic aspects of the story.

Though the potentially symbolic aspects of the story remain rather elusive, the light-hearted manner with which this production captures Mee’s play encompasses a wide range of elements from costume to construction with humor and an unquenchable thirst for life and love. Though love may bring the cast confusion and pain, this production suggests, in the words of one character, that “you can’t hold back just because there’s no such thing as life insurance.”

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