



## Frankie and Johnny at the Clair de Lune

Twenty years later, this love story resonates at Paragon.

By Juliet Wittman

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I've been worrying about Frankie and Johnny all day, trying to figure out whether or not they'll stay together. Which is odd, because they're a fictitious couple dreamed up by playwright Terrence McNally in his *Frankie and Johnny at the Clair de Lune* and brought to life by Emily Paton Davies and Thomas Borrillo at the Phoenix Theatre. The play is lovely and tender, with a wavering and ambiguous but indubitable happy ending. Still, both of these people are deeply damaged, and you can't imagine either would be easy to live with. So while I want everything to work out, I have an uneasy feeling about the future. Surely Frankie will get tired of Johnny's bullying and insecurity, and he'll be driven mad by her cold reserve. And I wonder how they'll handle the daily things couples face: fatigue; bills and not enough money to pay them; arrogant bosses and aggravating customers (they both work at a restaurant -- she as a waitress, he as a cook, since it's not the kind of place that employs chefs); nightly arguments about what programs to watch on the ancient TV in their tiny apartment; the possibility of children; illness and aging. Common sense says they won't make it. But still, I muse, they were so lonely before they met, and both are essentially warmhearted people, and they really do seem to have reached some level of mutual understanding.



Emily Paton Davies and Thomas Borrillo are Frankie and Johnny.

Details:

Presented by Paragon Theatre through March 10, 303-300-2210, [www.paragontheatre.org](http://www.paragontheatre.org).

The fact that I'm concerned about the union of a couple of characters in a twenty-year-old play is testament both to McNally's writing skills and to Paton Davies's and Borrillo's beautifully realistic and vulnerable performances. (There's also Michael Stricker's direction, and a set by David Lafont that deftly closes up the theater's too-wide stage and makes it cozy.) As the play opens, it's Frankie and Johnny's first date, and they are making love in semi-darkness. Johnny follows coitus with roars of laughter, then tells an amazingly un-sexy anecdote about how he once farted while trying to impress a girl. We'll soon find out that clumsiness -- both physical and emotional -- is close to being his trademark. Frankie quite likes Johnny, nonetheless, at least enough to contemplate seeing him again, but when she asks him to leave so she can spend the rest of the night alone, he won't do it. Simply won't. Because he's convinced that if he puts on his clothes and walks out the door, their brief relationship will be over. He loves her, he says, he wants to marry her -- and we can't figure out at this point if he's a mildly charming shlemiel or a creepy soon-to-be stalker. Neither can Frankie.

The dialogue, as the couple navigates these ambiguous waters, is wise, touching, true and very, very funny. Their sparring is contextualized by two other couples Frankie can see from the window of her cheap apartment: a pair of elderly people who never seem to speak to each other (though it's hard to see how Frankie can tell this through the glass), and a man with the habit of beating his partner to the floor, with her apparent compliance. Frankie knows about the compliance because she's offered the woman help and been rebuffed. So now she just eats grapes and watches. There's also a sort of deus ex machina in the form of a nighttime disc jockey whom Johnny calls with a request for the most beautiful piece of music in the world. The DJ is skeptical about the request -- he doesn't believe that this real-life Frankie and Johnny actually exist -- but he obliges with Debussy's *Claire de Lune*, which melts Frankie's resistance and both their hearts. The DJ's disembodied comments and the music somehow universalize the story and carry it into the realm of myth

and fairy tale, where everything is possible -- even a happy ending for a pair of people too battered by life to believe in such things.