



## REVIEWS

### *Grand Concourse*

An engrossing and heartbreaking New England premiere comes to SpeakEasy Stage.

Christopher Ehlers | Boston | March 13, 2017



Alejandro Simoes, Melinda Lopez, Ally Dawson, and Thomas Derrah in *Grand Concourse*, directed by Bridget Kathleen O'Leary, at SpeakEasy Stage Company.  
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downright heartbreaking play, currently in its New England premiere at [SpeakEasy Stage Company](#), where it will run through April 1.

Forgiveness is central to *Grand Concourse*, which also seeks to explore the onus of it rather than simply the act itself. Is forgiveness truly the mightiest sword, or is it nobler to issue forgiveness as a choice rather than a duty? Does obligatory mercy have destructive properties on the bestower? Deciding not to forgive, it turns out, can be a liberating thing.

That the character faced with these questions is a Catholic nun makes its unfolding all more fascinating. Shelley has been in charge of a soup kitchen at a church in the Bronx for 15 years, and lately she feels disconnected from her faith to the point where she has resorted to timing her prayers on the microwave. She struggles to fill the two minutes, and she is relieved when the time is up. She has also started questioning the meaning behind her work in the soup kitchen. "Forgive me but it feels pointless lately," she says in prayer to the microwave. The magnificent Melinda Lopez, whose performance is a thing of rare beauty, plays Shelley with stirring grace.

The only other employee at the soup kitchen that we see is Oscar, the Dominican security guard, who is played with irresistible charm by Alejandro Simoes. He and Shelley have a real affection for one another, and the chemistry between Lopez and Simoes is effortless. Oscar went to dental school in the Dominican Republic, but his training is useless in the U.S., and he has enrolled in community college. He's also on the brink of proposing to his girlfriend, Rosa. Among Oscar's many duties is keeping the needy out of the kitchen, though he has a soft spot for Frog (an amusing Thomas Derrah), a homeless alcoholic that sells jokes.

Things get shaken up a bit when Emma, a 19-year-old girl with rainbow-colored hair and an easy-to-love charisma (played by the excellent Ally Dawson), shows up to volunteer. She fits in pretty quickly, and fast reveals that she has leukemia and has decided to volunteer to take her mind off of it. She's an asset to the kitchen and over time goes above and beyond, landing Frog a place to live and a job interview. But there's more than meets

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characters with a deceptive simplicity, making *Grand Concourse* one of the most fulfilling theatrical experiences of the year.

That the cast is first-rate only elevates the play's impact. Lopez fills Shelley out with gentle nuance and a quiet torment that is heart-stopping. Derrah is masterful as Frog. The role of Oscar could easily be turned into a caricature, but Simoes lends a passionate and poignant texture. The role of Emma is a tricky one. While she's a thoroughly unlikable character, Dawson's magnetic aura and inner tumult make Emma someone we might — like Shelley does — try to understand rather than dismiss.

It is one of the hallmarks of a great director when his or her work seems invisible onstage, and such is the case with Bridget Kathleen O'Leary's sensitive and swift direction. In addition to sculpting four tremendous performances, it is no small feat to fill a production with both genuine humor and devastating heartbreak.

There are some awkward transitions between scenes that frequently take us out of the action rather than move it forward, and this is not helped by Lee Schuna's jarring score that sounds like an old made for TV movie. Karen Perlow's lighting, however, is just right, as is Jenna McFarland Lord's set — a painstakingly realistic industrial kitchen with shabby stained glass windows hanging from above.

*Grand Concourse* is the kind of play that works its way under your skin and lodges itself there, hanging around long after the lights have come up. It is one of those all-too-rare shows that feel like a privilege to sit through.

## FEATURED IN THIS STORY

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Play

**Grand Concourse**

SpeakEasy Stage Company | Boston

Closed on April 01, 2017

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Bridget Kathleen O'Leary

Alejandro Simoes

Dominican Republic

Melinda Lopez

Ally Dawson

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