

BWW Review: THE BRIDGES OF MADISON COUNTY at Axelrod Performing Arts Center Proves That True Love Exists In Unexpected Ways

Hunter Foster directs Axelrod PAC's production starring Kate Baldwin and Aaron Lazar.

by [Erica Handel](#) Mar. 14, 2022

The Axelrod Performing Arts Center presents its highly anticipated production of [Jason Robert Brown](#) and [Marsha Norman](#)'s musical *The Bridges of Madison County* this March. The production is directed by [Hunter Foster](#) who played the role of Bud Johnson in the original Broadway cast. Broadway legends [Kate Baldwin](#) and [Aaron Lazar](#) star in the respective roles of Francesca Johnson and Robert Kincaid. It is a treat for audiences to witness their talent in this New Jersey production.

Robert James Waller wrote *The Bridges of Madison County* novel in 1992, and it was adapted into a 1995 Oscar-nominated film featuring [Meryl Streep](#) and [Clint Eastwood](#) as Francesca and Robert. The musical has a book by [Marsha Norman](#), and music and lyrics by [Jason Robert Brown](#). It first premiered at the 2013 Williamstown Theatre Festival, and transferred to Broadway in 2014 starring Kelli O'Hara and [Steven Pasquale](#). The production earned four Tony nominations, securing [Jason Robert Brown](#) two wins for Best Original Score and Best Orchestrations. *The Bridges of Madison County* had a four-month Broadway run, but continued its legacy with a national tour in 2015.

The Bridges of Madison County is a story about an Italian immigrant and war bride Francesca who meets National Geographic photographer Robert Kincaid in Winterset, Iowa. While Francesca's husband and two children are away at the Illinois State Fair, Robert arrives at Francesca's house to ask for directions to the Rosemont Bridge in Madison County. The two become friendly and develop an unexpected, secretive affair, leaving both lovers in a risky situation. Francesca and Robert bring out parts of each other they never knew were possible, but are worried that their relationship may be too good to be true. *The Bridges of Madison County* proves that true love can exist, but at what cost?

[Kate Baldwin](#) leads the cast as Francesca Johnson, an artist from Naples, Italy who fled her home country during World War II. Baldwin is a perfect fit for the role, and is able to express a wide range of emotions in her performance. She embodies Francesca's loneliness, as well as her humor and excitement when she spends time with Robert. From beginning to end, Baldwin beautifully sings [Jason Robert Brown](#)'s score throughout the show. She starts with the opening number, "To Build A Home," which is the audience's introduction into Francesca's mundane life as a housewife in Iowa. Baldwin displayed her character's transformation in the closing song "Always Better." It was a heartfelt ending to the show, where Francesca looks back at her time

with Robert and is grateful to have met him. Baldwin's soft, soprano voice filled the entire theater, and easily roped audiences into Francesca's story.

[Aaron Lazar](#) steps into the role of Robert Kincaid, a rugged photographer and wanderer who travels the world to take photos of important landmarks. Lazar's intense and passionate portrayal of Robert made audiences root for him, even though his character was put into an awkward position. The Cherry Hill, New Jersey native's singing voice was worth the price of admission alone. Lazar made his first entrance through the aisle with the song, "Temporarily Lost." It was a memorable moment for front row audience members to see a Broadway star up close. Lazar's version of Robert is someone who is optimistic and has big dreams. In the song "The World Inside A Frame," Robert shows Francesca how to capture a good photo, and they bond over their creative interests. The somber tune "It All Fades Away" shows a different side to Robert, when he reflects on the time he spent with Francesca and how it changed his life, but also broke his heart.

Baldwin and Lazar made an unstoppable pair as the quiet Francesca and adventurous Robert. The actors have worked with each other many times before, and it was evident in their performance. They sang the iconic [Jason Robert Brown](#) anthems "Falling Into You," where Francesca and Robert realize they're falling in love with each other, and "One Second and a Million Miles," when Robert convinces Francesca to leave the farm with him. They put their own stamp on the renditions of these classic songs, which satisfied the musical theater fans in the audience. The score did Baldwin and Lazar's voices great justice, and gave a powerful lasting impression. The Broadway veterans have a natural chemistry onstage, which worked well and made it easy for them to carry the show. Baldwin and Lazar's scenes both together and apart were equally as incredible, showing how talented they truly are.

There are many other notable performers in this production of *The Bridges of Madison County*. [Bart Shatto](#) takes on the role of Francesca's husband Richard "Bud" Johnson, who was an American World War II soldier turned farm owner. Thomas Cromer and Emily Pellicchia play Francesca and Bud's children, Michael and [Carolyn Johnson](#). Giuliana Augello splits the roles of Robert's ex-wife Marian and Francesca's sister Chiara. [Nikki Yarnell](#) and Mark Megill are the Johnson family's neighbors, Marge and Charlie. Each actor shines in ensemble numbers such as "State Road 21" and "When I'm Gone." The small cast allowed for this story to be told in a clear, intimate way.

The creative team for *The Bridges of Madison County* whisked audiences away to a small town in rural Iowa. [Anna Louizos](#)' scenic design featured wooden arches representing the Rosemont Bridge. There were scenes in the kitchen and bedroom of Francesca's house, and a detailed tapestry design for the Illinois State Fair. An added element was the projection screen that showed the cornfields on the farm. [Paul Miller](#)'s lighting design changed the color of the sky during the course of the show. Lauren Roark created simple costumes like the ones that were worn in the 1960s Midwest, and [Jeff Sherwood](#)'s sound design gave a sense of what it was like to live on a farm. [Keith Levenson](#) conducts a 10-piece orchestra that makes [Jason Robert Brown](#)'s music sound even more breathtaking.

Those who are lucky enough to see *The Bridges of Madison County* at Axelrod Performing Arts Center will experience the performance of a lifetime. [Hunter Foster](#) directs a production with excellent actors, beautiful music, and a story that will resonate with audiences for years to come. Anyone who has the opportunity to see this musical in person will love every minute of it.

How To Get Tickets

Tickets for *The Bridges of Madison County* can be purchased by calling 732-531-9106 ex.14 or by visiting the Axelrod Performing Arts Center website at <https://www.axelrodartscenter.com/the-bridges-of-madison-county>.

The show will be performed in the Vogel Auditorium through March 27. The theatre is located at 100 Grant Avenue in Deal Park, NJ. For more information on Axelrod Performing Arts Center, you can follow them on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#) @axelrodarts or on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/axelrodarts/>