

# Axelrod Performing Arts Center presents a polished, intense ‘The Bridges of Madison County’

By: JAY LUSTIG | March 19, 2022



Kate Baldwin and Aaron Lazar co-star in “The Bridges of Madison County” at the Axelrod Performing Arts Center in Deal.

I understand if you’re immune to the charms of Robert James Waller’s 1992 novella, “The Bridges of Madison County.” And you may not have loved the 1995 film of the same name, co-starring Meryl Streep and Clint Eastwood, that followed.

But add Jason Robert Brown’s soaring score to this story — as the 2013 musical version did — and “The Bridges of Madison County” becomes pretty irresistible. Especially when it is performed by a top-notch cast, as is currently being done at the Axelrod Performing Arts Center in Deal.



A State Fair scene in “The Bridges of Madison County.”

Two-time Tony nominee Kate Baldwin plays Francesca, an Iowa housewife who escapes the drudgery that her life has become via an affair with Robert (Aaron Lazar), a worldly but lonely, divorced National Geographic photographer who comes to their sleepy rural town in 1965 on an assignment. Both sing beautifully, create fully rounded characters and project the urgent, larger-than-life emotions that Brown’s songs call for.

“All my life, I have been falling into you,” Robert sings, in the musical’s centerpiece love song, “Falling Into You,” which closes the first act.

“Whatever we do from here, don’t give it a name,” Francesca responds. “We mustn’t reduce it to something clear or simple/I want to believe that we are the first people on Earth to know this feeling/To know this moment, to cross this line.”

She, born in Italy, and he, a Seattle-based world traveler, bond over feeling similarly adrift in this middle-of-nowhere town.

“I’ve never been to the real middle of the country like this,” he says. “It feels really empty.”

“I know,” she says. “It’s not what I dreamed of as a girl.”

This is a polished production, with strong performances throughout the cast. Bart Shatto is particularly good at capturing the wounded dignity of Francesca’s unassuming and frequently perplexed husband Bud, a farmer who conveniently spends most of the play taking their two children to the Indiana State Fair to compete in a Best Steer contest. (He stays in touch with Francesca via telephone.) And Shatto really shines on “When I’m Gone,” the second act burst of gospel that steers the play toward the cosmic.



Bart Shatto, left, co-stars as Francesca’s husband Bud, in “The Bridges of Madison County.”

Mark Megill, as Francesca and Bud’s down-to-earth, regular-guy friend Charlie, is quite impressive on this number as well. Elsewhere, the somewhat buffoonish Charlie and his nosy but well-meaning wife Marge (Nikki Yarnell) provide some much-needed comic relief from Waller’s passionate saga (adapted for the stage by Marsha Norman).

Hunter Foster, who played Bud in the 2014 Broadway production, directs. His deep familiarity with the material probably helped him draw out emotionally resonant performances from the cast members.

Anna Louizos’ scenic design and Lauren Roark’s costumes effectively evoke the drab, plain life that Francesca is rebelling against. And Louizos is able to suggest the majesty of the bridges themselves without fully reproducing them.

“The Bridges of Madison County” has the reputation of being overly sentimental, because of the magical romance at its core. But I don’t think that’s a valid criticism — of the musical, at least — because the story’s melodrama is balanced by frequent reminders of the frustrating real-life challenges that Francesca and Robert face. This is not a fairy tale romance. (Francesca, in fact, undercuts the fantasy aspect of the story by wondering, “From what time or place or fairy tale comes someone so ridiculous, so earnest, so strong?”).

“The Bridges of Madison County” ultimately lives in a kind of middle ground between, as Bruce Springsteen once sang, “what’s flesh and what’s fantasy.” And when it is well executed — as it is here —it rings true on a lot of levels.

*The Axelrod Performing Arts Center will present “The Bridges of Madison County” through March 27. Visit [axelrodartscenter.com](http://axelrodartscenter.com).*